00077902

BOMBAY BRANCH

OF THE

Royal Asiatic Society.

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 18 July, 2018

A COSTLY FREAK

77902

BY

MAXWELL GRAY

AUTHOR OF

"THE SILENCE OF DEAN MAITLAND," "IN THE HEART OF THE STORM,"
"THE LAST SENTENCE," ETC.

LIBRARY OF THE BOMBAY BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

"Wer nie sein Brod mit Thränen ass,
Wer nie die kummervollen Nächte
Auf seinem Bette weinend sass,
Der kennt euch nicht, ihr himmlischen Mächte."

K.A. 2 2.5/

LONDON
KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, TRÜBNER, & CO. LTD
PATERNOSTER HOUSE, CHARING CROSS ROAD
1894

Good
823
Gray/COS
77902

The rights of translation and of reproduction are reserved.

A COSTLY FREAK

CHAPTER I.

THE crude, pale brightness of a lengthening February day made the dingy room dingier than ever; it showed patches and rents in the faded cretonne and called attention to the thread-bare carpet, the original colour and pattern of which were forgotten. A small fire was burning dead and dusty between clay sides put into the grate to save coal; one long thickly moted sunbeam fell across Walter's couch and the dull red table-cover, ending on Mr. Ray, who sat, a thin, bent figure, with arms crossed before him on the table, pensively smiling.

His coat-sleeves were green and shiny, with frayed cuffs, his all-round clerical collar was fresh but jagged at the edge, his face, as worn as his clothing, was clean shaven except

for a small grey whisker, his hair was grey and scanty, his lips, now tremulously smiling, were both severe and sweet in expression, there was a light of unspeakable tenderness in the pale-blue eyes bent on his crippled son, who was laughing aloud.

Near the lad's couch, which was placed before the window, sat his mother with a great pile of linen that she was darning with near-sighted care; she, like her husband, was elderly, grey, and care-worn, and she, too, was smiling pensively and letting her work lie idle while she removed her spectacles to look at the antics of the little pug dog, who had just abstracted a handkerchief from unconscious Mr. Ray's pocket, and was hiding it behind the window curtain.

"Well done, Buffie! Clever Buffie!" cried the boy, his pretty pale face transformed from its habitual pinched fretfulness to a natural boyish expression.

"I don't know, Wattie," said his father, beguiled to a mild little joke, "if it is strictly moral to teach Buffie such tricks. Fie, Buffie, fie!"

"Bring it back, Buff," said the mother;

"see, Wattie, he is tearing it; call him off, dear."

It was then that the tabby kitten, hitherto content with demurely watching the little dog's sport, thought fit to descend with a tigerish spring upon the handkerchief and snatch the end of it with a pretty affectation of fierceness from Buffie. Whereupon Buffie worried one corner of the frail rag, and the kitten, with glittering eyes, bristling whiskers and quivering tail, and many a quick twist and turn of its lithe little body, bit and let go, and caught and tossed and twirled the other, with infinite variety of graceful gesture and pretty play, sometimes rushing away with a comic face of feigned terror, then quickly returning to the charge with an air of business-like determination, as if play were the serious and sole aim of existence, until Buffie, disgusted at the kitling's frivolity, walked away and curled himself with a discontented grunt and many turns on the shabby hearth-rug.

While Mr. Ray looked and smiled at all this guileless mirth, his under lip quivered a little. He was thinking of the doctor's

prescription for Walter of generous diet, and various impossible luxuries. With these the boy might grow out of his weakness and become a fairly capable man; without them he would probably sink and pass away in a decline. Walter was his only son, the long-desired child of his old age.

"Twenty pounds," he repeated to himself, "only twenty pounds might save my boy." Then the spectacles through which he was watching the kitten's play were dimmed, and something rose chokingly in his throat.

Why, people gave twenty pounds for a piece of furniture, a watch, a cart, a lady's gown, a pony, or a cow, while he could not anywhere find twenty pounds to save his child, his only beloved son. He kept racking his brains, as he sat at the table, in the end of the sunbeam, to find some way of raising this trivial sum. His old silver watch would fetch next to nothing; his books were few, shabby and old; he had no luxuries to give up. It was hard, very hard to sit still and see his handsome, gifted son fade before his very eyes, and be absolutely impotent to help him. Sometimes when the boy suffered acute pain,

his great dark eyes seemed to reproach his father in their large agonised gaze, crying dumbly in the words of Ugolino's little dying son in the Hunger Tower—

"Padre mio, chè non m' aiuti?"

"And I would give the whole world, I would give my very soul to help him," the poor father moaned in helpless anguish.

Had he deserved this at the hands of his Maker? he was sometimes tempted to ask in the bitterness of his soul. "Doth Job serve God for naught?" he heard in reply. Then again he would think of his many sorrows, his hard labours, his lonely youth and long-deferred marriage, his plodding colourless life, and wonder that he and his patient blameless wife should be denied this one solace of a strong-armed son to comfort their old age.

"We have three good daughters, William," the gentle wife would remind him. But he wanted a son, a strong man-child on whom he could lean, above all, he wanted *Walter*, and to save Walter's young life from cruel suffering and early death.

So many men had healthy, happy sons

rich men, happy men, careless men, men who feared not God neither regarded man, while he, who had walked uprightly from his cradle, had but this one poor blighted boy, who was dying for lack of twenty pounds.

The sunbeam faded from the man's grey pathetic face and the boy's clustered curls, a quick firm step struck the gravel outside, and the door-bell rang sharply.

"It's old Burroughes," said Walter, whose corner commanded the exits and entrances to the house, "I like old Burroughes."

"Old Burroughes" was just over thirty, and Mr. Ray's rector; it was as if a Russian should patronise the Czar.

Old Burroughes' amiable and usually happy countenance was clouded this afternoon; he did not like his errand, and though he rang sharply and resolutely, as one rings at the dentist's bell, with resolution screwed up to extraction-point, he was glad of the delay that occurred before the door was slowly, tentatively, and suspiciously opened an inch at a time, until the startled countenance of Bella, the little maid-of-all-work, was fully revealed.

It was a rosy and well-scrubbed face, in

spite of one large dab of smut on the nose and another on the forehead, Bella's one distinguishing characteristic being a pronounced talent for attracting the whole of the household dust and dirt to her own small person. Other talent she had none; her fourteen brief summers having been spent in acquiring a wild terror of every human creature, which terror effectually scattered what few wits she might once have possessed.

"Bella," said old Burroughes, contemplating the panic-stricken face thoughtfully and speaking solemnly, "I am not an ogre, I don't eat girls up alive."

Bella curtseyed with a distracted air, smoothing her hands over her clean white apron, and leaving a black trail upon it, while her poor eyes looked as if they would jump out of her head.

"Bella," continued old Burroughes in his deep voice, "when were you last beaten?"

"Please, sir, the day father took ill," she gasped. "Now he's dead, I ain't got nobody to beat me no more," she added pathetically, trembling and shrinking before her interlocutor.

Old Burroughes frowned, and silently handed Bella a shilling, and then, having asked for the master of the house, was admitted and announced in the frightened whisper in which Bella habitually communicated information.

He had often stood in that room before, but its dingy cheerlessness had never before so forcibly impressed itself upon him. "If I'm not the biggest coward in the habitable universe," he said to himself, during his reception, when he found himself swallowing down a rebellious something that rose in his throat, "I'll eat my hat. I'll do more. I'll crunch a Bishop's mitre. If only they weren't so glad to see me!"

"Hooray!" cried Walter, when it came to his turn to have his thin hand squeezed in the rector's powerful fist. "Why, I knew your step before you came round the corner. 'Here's old Burroughes,' I said."

"Let him call me 'old Burroughes,' I like it," was the rector's response to Mr. Ray's gentle rebuke. The heartiness of George's deep voice, the largeness of his manner and his breezy cordial presence filled the dingy

little parlour with a sense of ampler, freer, and more wholesome life. Walter's pains diminished, Mrs. Ray's pile of mending seemed smaller and her household cares less oppressive, and the grey curate's burden appeared lighter, and his narrow horizon wider and brighter under the cheery influence.

"Here's a poet," the guest added, handing Walter a green, cloth-bound volume, "superior to Longfellow, but not quite up to Homer's 'mark.'"

"These moderns," scornfully returned Walter, whose acquaintance with this century's poetry was limited to the esteemed American and an odd volume of Moore, "are milksops, molly-coddles, old grannies. There ain't any fight in 'em."

In response to which George Burroughes, still standing large and lofty above the little lad, snatched the volume back, and, opening it at random, began in his strong deep voice with the long booming rhythm of an Atlantic breaker—

> "So all day long the noise of battle rolled
> Among the mountains by the winter sea,"

which two fine lines were enough; for when he paused to draw in a mighty breath at the end of the magnificently rising roll, he was startled by the sound of a short sob, and saw tears in the sensitive boy's eyes.

"Better read it alone first, Watt," he said, with a gentle, pitiful smile, "it's a stunning fight, though the man who wrote it isn't dead yet. I want to speak to your father now, on—on—business."

Burroughes sighed and his face clouded again at the last word, as he turned with a slight inclination of the head to Mr. Ray, who was absorbed in the emotion the lines of poetry evoked in the susceptible lad.

"Poor child!" Mr. Ray sighed, leading his guest from the room; "his mind is too strong for his body. Anything grand brings tears to his eyes."

"There isn't enough animal in him, that's all," Burroughes replied cheerily. "He'll grow out of that with care."

"With care," echoed the poor father abstractedly, "and generous diet, port wine, open air, change of scene. I — I hope you're not cold. I—I'm sorry there's no

fire," he added, drawing up a chair before the empty hearth.

"Not in the least," returned the rector nervously, "as warm as a toast. But—hm!—well!—ha!—"

Mr. Ray, ignoring these ineffectual stutters, began upon some parish detail, while George Burroughes looked round the chill and cheerless room.

It boasted some pathetic ornamental details; a pair of cold alabaster vases on the cold white painted mantel-piece, a small oaken cross, made out of the wood from a cruelly restored church in which Mr. Ray had ministered, some sea-shells, a large presentation Bible, some faded photographs, a print of the Finding of Moses, and one of Rebecca at the Well, with some dreadful home-made imitations of wood-carving made out of peach-stones and fir-apples, and some girlish arrangements of muslin and ribbons, which accentuated the melancholy of cheap and faded upholstery. The apartment was clean, and distressingly tidy, its small shabby piano was the sole piece of furniture that gave evidence of daily use, else its impossible little

sofa and penitential arm-chair, its obsolete, wool-worked fender-stool and half-dozen cane-bottomed chairs, its white netted curtains, and veneered walnut table, had a dolefully uninhabited, unused look. It was not only cold with the chill of a sunless, fireless room, but it was distinctly fusty, and Burroughes averred that the smell of it always gave him a cold in the head.

He sat on the end of the impossible couch, which he likened to a pale reflection of St. Lawrence's gridiron, and leant forward with his elbows on his knees and his eyes upon the well-saved carpet, vaguely catching the drift of his curate's communication on the efficiency of the infant-school staff, and wondering how in the world he was to plunge into the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"Yes," he replied, "yes, yes. I should certainly counsel and countenance a little wholesome corporal punishment."

"Corporal punishment!" exclaimed the curate, aghast.

"Certainly; most wholesome at that age," returned the rector, with profound gravity.

"You see, to appeal to reason where reason is not to be looked for is—ah!—rot."

"I am, to my sorrow, obliged to agree with you on the inefficacy of an appeal to reason in this case," continued Mr. Ray, "but corporal punishment!"

"My dear sir," continued George, intently examining the half-moons in his strong, well-kept finger nails, "you are tender-hearted to a fault. I'm not for any savagery myself, especially on such a tender subject as this, but just a little sharp sonorous smacking with the open hand, you know. I'll do it myself, if that's all."

"You will smack the infant-schoolmistress!" slowly ejaculated Mr. Ray, with a look of distraught bewilderment and a voice of matchless horror.

George threw back his head and laughed—how that stalwart young parson could laugh! The laughter of Homeric gods was a feeble cackle in comparison with his whole-hearted, strong-chested roar. "No, no!" he replied, "poor little Miss Sprigg shan't be smacked. No, no, we won't smack Miss Sprigg on any account. Miss Sprigg! ha!

ha! Not," he added, after a reflective pause, "but what those firm, solid cherry-cheeks of hers are not tempting; they offer," he added, unconsciously opening his strong palm, "such a fine field for a good sounding smack."

"Mr. Burroughes!" exclaimed the curate, with slow and emphatic reproof, his face turning pink and then pale with shame and distress.

"I beg your pardon!" cried George, with a smothered splutter, "but upon my so—upon my word! If only you wouldn't—forgive me, sir, but you take things so seriously. One smile from you—and I could have borne it."

"You are young, Mr. Burroughes," returned his curate with gentle sadness, the extreme distress softening from his wistful face, "and I fear that I am old—too old perhaps," he added with a sigh that went to the younger man's heart, and emphasised the feeling that had oppressed him ever since the Marquis of Woolford presented him to this rich benefice some six months back, and he found Mr. Ray virtually curate-in-charge,

as he had been during the indolent, invalidish rule of the last rector—a feeling of the serious incongruity of his position with regard to this saintly elder.

"Dear Mr. Ray," he replied, catching at this opening to unfold the purpose of his visit, "it is not that you are too old, but that I am too young—ah! h'm! You see, ah—I've often thought—and I daresay it has struck you as well—that—h'm—in point of fact, I ought to have a younger curate."

Mr. Ray had turned deathly pale; his head drooped forward a little with the look of a man hearing his long-expected doom. "You want me," he said slowly and hoarsely, "you want me—to—to resign?"

"I was merely suggesting," returned George quickly and a little huskily, "that you mightn't care—ah! at your time of life—to be, ah! under a—rector younger than yourself. Why, it's a thundering shame," he blurted out, "that a man of your attainments, your long and faithful service in the ministry—a man revered for saintly living——"

"No, no!" interrupted Mr. Ray, turning

pink, "you must not say such things. My dear young brother——"

"That you shouldn't be rector," thundered George; "you ought to have a sole charge at least."

"True, very true. At my age I ought to have done better. But somehow," Mr. Ray added, "I never got on. I am a failure. I am not a good preacher. I strive to set the Word honestly and clearly before the people, but I have not the gift of eloquence—and—the young need to be attracted—the people must be 'compelled to come in,' in the words of the parable. I——" Tears choked his voice.

"My very dear sir," cried George distressed, "you misunderstand me. You're too good for the place, that's what I mean. As for your sermons, I'm sure, for my part, I've never heard one without feeling, though I'm afraid not being, the better for it."

"But you wish me to go?" added Mr. Ray, swallowing down his emotion, and looking up with a wistful eagerness that pained George to the heart.

"Indeed, I don't. I know how splendidly

you've worked the parish. I know what the poor think of you. I'm not in the running with the cottagers and the sick—why, you're the prince of parish priests."

"Nay," returned the poor curate, blushing again, "you must not say such things indeed. But I had hoped—I had humbly trusted—that I had been permitted to begin a good work in the youths' Bible classes and the cottage lectures, and—well! I should grieve to have to leave those dear people. I trust I am not presumptuous in thinking that these works have—under Providence—been blessed. Still——" He sighed, and his fingers trembled in their nervous play with a book-marker in the presentation Bible.

"Now, why the dickens," murmured Burroughes to himself, "must this good old chap say 'under Providence,' and put on the conventional snuffle? How can he expect people to stand him?" For it must be confessed that the Rev. George's dislike of shibboleths, and especially of what he termed *evan* shibboleth, was such that he could not have put up with St. Paul himself had he used them.

"Nobody," he said aloud, "doubts that. Why, only yesterday, old Betty James said to me, 'Lard bless 'ee, sir, there baint nothen wuth living in this yer world for, without it's the gospel we gets at they lectures, and a cup o' tay to comfort anybody's inside.' She's a ripping old girl, is Betty. But——" Burroughes paused; it flashed upon him that altar-flowers, embroidered stoles, cassocks and frequent services were poor things in comparison with genuine piety and efficient ministrations to the poor. Yet Mr. Ray was emptying the church; the parishioners demanded more music, brighter services, progress.

"But there is something else?" faltered Mr. Ray. "I—I know I am behind the times. The old spoken responses seem to me more fit, more uplifting—still——"

"Oh! it isn't that," returned Burroughes hastily, "besides, you've given in about the responses. But the Marquis——"

"The Marquis!" echoed the curate, with a piteous, uncontrollable quiver of the lip, "oh! if he is displeased——"

"Oh! well, the Marquis is a mere man of

the world. He was only saying that he thought—but never mind the Marquis. He ought to give you a living, and won't. But suppose now, dear Mr. Ray, that you were to seek a sole charge; that would surely be the better plan, don't you think so?"

The Rev. George was still considering the pearly half-moons in his finger nails, and telling himself that he was the biggest bungler on this side of Acheron, and wondering why tact had been left out in the making of him, when a faint sound made him look up, to see his curate's face, greyer still in the grey of fast gathering twilight, partly covered by a shaking hand, beneath which George saw a quivering chin and divined the slow cold tears of age and anguish.

"I will try," the old man faltered in a broken voice, when he looked up after a painful struggle with himself. "But my boy, my poor blighted boy! Alas! alas! I put my Walter before my people, the Lord forgive and pity me!"

George, shocked and pained, sprang up, and laid his strong hand gently on the old man's heaving shoulder, "Sir, Mr. Ray,

dearest sir," he cried, "you don't like the plan; think no more of it, I entreat you."

"It—it is Walter's last chance," gasped Mr. Ray.

"Think no more of it, my dear sir. I only threw out a suggestion," continued George, in his hearty voice. "You shall not leave unless you wish it. As for the Marquis, and the whole blessed lot of them, they may go to Hong Kong!"

CHAPTER II.

THE table was set for tea in the parlour, when the two clergymen returned to its warmer atmosphere; the dull fire had been stirred and replenished, and Bella, with a black kettle in her hand, was just tumbling into the grate in over-zealous efforts to be quick, at which Buffie was madly barking, and the kitten, converted for the moment into a tiny treble arch on double pillars, swearing the prettiest little swear in the world.

Mr. Ray, with the abstracted air of long habit, silently rescued the kettle, while the distraught Bella regained the perpendicular, moustached herself fiercely by drawing a smutty forefinger immediately beneath her small nose, and, casually upsetting the milk on her way, left the room, audibly falling over the umbrella-stand outside. The family sometimes thought that, "but for the honour

of the thing," it would have been more convenient to have dispensed with Bella's services.

"But then what would become of Bella?" Mr. Ray always objected, when there was a question of sending her away. "No one else would or could employ the poor child," —an argument the family considered unanswerable.

Bella out of the way, the kettle began its homely song, Buffie subsided with a contented grunt into his spasmodic dog-sleep, the kitten's temporary agitation passed and she resumed her interrupted pastime of frantically assaulting, biting, and tearing a piece of crisp paper under Walter's couch. The paper was so light it floated before the wind of the kitten's onrush, she caught it in her paws, tossed and tore it, let it go, sprang on it, and worried it with her teeth till nothing was left but some fluttering bits, one of which George Burroughes, with bachelor's tidiness, mechanically picked up, and threw into the fire.

"Hark to this!" Walter cried, turning to the firelight when Buffie was still—

"'The shattering trumpet shrilleth high,
The hard brands shiver on the steel,
The splintered spear-shafts crack and fly,
And horse and rider reel;
They reel, they roll in clanging lists,
And, when the tide of combat stands'—

"Why, you can hear all the swords and the spears smashing; you feel as if some fellow was knocking you clean out of your saddle——"

"Look here, young one," said George, taking the volume gently from him, "if you carry on like this, I shall bring you nothing more exciting than Dr. Watts' 'Divine and Moral Songs'—

'How doth the little busy bee
Improve this shining hour!
She's gathered honeycomb that we
This minute will devour——'

something domestic, pious and soothing, you know."

"My *dear* Mr. Burroughes!" exclaimed Mrs. Ray.

"One drops into poetry when demoralised by Walter, Mrs. Ray. Pray let me hold the kettle for you."

Mr. Ray then began an elaborate grace;

George bending his head, and looking on the table-cloth—which, though spotless, had evidently seen service since its latest journey from the laundress's hand—and hoping the powerful odour from the newly lit benzoline lamp was nourishing and conducive to digestion.

Before the grace was finished, the door softly opened and as softly closed again, admitting a tired, dowdily-dressed girl, who remained standing, stiff and awkward, until the grace was said, when she came forward, blushing furiously at her ill-timed entrance, and ungraciously offered a limp hand to the guest.

"One might suppose me an embodied indigestion, a walking cold in the head, an unpaid bill, or even the doctrine of Predestination, from her scowl," he thought, stiffly accepting the favour.

"Tired, Millie?" asked her father. "What made you so late, my dear?"

She murmured something uninteresting to George, and sat down rather heavily in a chair against the wall, faintly illumined by the flaring lamp on the centre-table, and

drew her clumsily-shod and mud-covered feet beneath her skirts.

Her mother, looking at her face purpled by the chill night air, thought that she had been crying. George, who, like most men, viewed women at the wrong end, wondered how she came to have such clumsy feet, and why she wore such shabby boots and gloves. Millie Ray was, in his eyes, a species of criminal: she dressed badly, stammered and blushed for nothing—in short, had no manner. All women, he held, should dress well, however simply and cheaply; every woman should have a winning and gracious manner; for why do women exist if not to please men? Millie Ray could in no way justify her entrance on this earthly scene. He usually spoke of her, with mild contempt, as "that poor Miss Ray." Her entrance vexed him, he scarcely knew why. As the climax to her iniquity, she carried a good-sized and not ornamental basket: a basket carried by a woman was an offence to him, it suggested cheap trippers, luncheon-laden —it gave a woman a sort of greedy, acquisitive air, especially when accompanied by an

anxious face; and Millie's face was always anxious—another sin, because anxiety is undignified and unbecoming, especially to young women.

"For Wattie," the unconscious criminal said in an undertone, drawing something folded in a fresh green leaf from the offending basket, and passing it to her mother.

"Butter!" cried Walter, in pouting disgust; "and I wanted eggs!"

"But you were longing for fresh butter, Wattie," reproved his father; and the Rev. George observed that the butter on the table was in sharp-angled and white-crystalled cubes, such as are cut out of tubs in grocers' shops, and offer a marked contrast to the soft dimples and inviting curves of the fresh farm-product.

"And I waited for it, Wattie," said Millie from her corner. "The butter wouldn't come till the afternoon, and was hard to work when it did." She spoke with a wearied, studied gentleness, yet with a faint quiver, almost a whine of reproach, that further irritated the stalwart rector, who was never weary, reproachful, or studious

of speech, but spoke out straight and strong, without stint, whatever was in his heart.

"Poor beggar!" he thought, when the parlour was emptied of his large and breezy presence; "no wonder he is prosy and narrow. But he shan't be turned out. They're molly-coddling that jolly little chap, Walter, between them. I suppose he's doomed, and it will kill the old man. Wine, good nourishment—h'm. Surely a dozen of sound old port would be no offence—yet I don't like—" Certain words floated through the rector's mind, and he coloured up in the darkness. The piteous quiver of the old man's chin, and his passionate self-accusations and laments over his own unspirituality, came before him.

Perhaps Mr. Ray was nearer the apostolic standard than the man whose paid subordinate he was, the latter reflected, as he stepped into his own ample, well-ordered, well-lighted hall, through which vibrated the musical murmur of a gong, warning the decorous to prepare for the solemn rite of dinner, the approaching celebration of which was further betokened by an appetising whiff of odour from an opened and gently shut door

to the back regions, and by the glitter and sparkle of silver, glass, and flowers on snowy napery in the dining-room close at hand.

"You don't appreciate old Burroughes, Millie?" her brother said, when the rector was gone.

"I like him best on the other side of the door," Millie replied. She had bathed her face, removed the muddy boots from her weary feet, brushed her hair, and taken a cup of tea. She was now another girl, refreshed and at ease, though still pale and tired, with too many angles for a face so young, and bright eyes too large for the face. "You see he is too big for this parlour," she added.

"You mean the parlour's too small for him," retorted Walter.

"*He* thinks so," said Millie, spreading a very little of the sharp-angled butter on a very thick piece of bread; "he's so vewy supeahweah. He's an Oxford Man; he rowed in the University Eight; he'll *never* forget it."

"I should just think he wouldn't!" said Walter.

"He looks at us all as if we were specimens in a museum," continued Millie; "but he can't read my label—that worries him. He can't imagine any girl between a shop-woman and his cousin Maud, with her affected drawl and her society manner and high hand-shaking."

"You needn't sneer at Maud Ascott: she's an awfully jolly girl; and as for high hand-shaking—well, girls who shove out their hand at a man as if they thought he was going to steal it — not that there's the slightest fear, my dear Mill — and then snatch it away as if it was poisoned—"

"My dears, my dears, what *are* you talking about?" from Mrs. Ray.

Mr. Ray heard the young voices with a vague pleasure, but he did not heed what they said. His gaze was upon Walter's over-bright eyes and hollow flushed cheeks, and in the silence of his heart he was praying.

After tea, the ladies, sedulously hindered by the devoted Bella, who had added a black eye to her moustache, cleared the table. Mr. Ray placed upon it an ink-stand and blotting-pad, around which he

erected a solid rampart of large and shabby books, a huge commentated Bible amongst them.

This was the signal for absolute unbroken silence in the room. Walter's couch was drawn up so as to place his head within range of the benzoline lamp on one side; Mrs. Ray, with her work-basket, sat within its influence on the other; and Millie, after warming her chilblained fingers at the kitchen-grate, took a hand-lamp, put a shawl over her shoulders, went into the fireless room, and practised on the piano for an hour. Tears fell over her face during this exercise: she kept her handkerchief on the music-stand, and dried her eyes as often as one of the busy hands got a brief holiday.

"How can I ever tell father?" she was saying to herself from time to time; and when she was half-way through her appointed hour, she remembered that crying leaves traces, carefully dried her eyes, and suffered no more tears to fall.

"How shall I tell father?" she repeated, when the set time chronicled by her little silver watch had expired.

Millie had set off at half-past eight that morning, on no more solid foundation than "tea in a mild form," as her father phrased it, and the sharp-angled butter, thinly spread upon bread, to Little Buckley, a farm two miles and a half distant—very muddy miles, too—in a good soaking February rain. Once at Little Buckley, she had been busily occupied with her pupils, except for a break of an hour and a half for a stiff little walk and dinner, until four, when she waited for the perverse butter that had refused to come at the proper time, and employed the waiting time in cleaning and packing eggs for market.

"I can't abide seeing anybody idle in my house," the farmer's wife had observed in justification of this invasion of Millie's well-earned leisure. "Idle hands don't do in a farmhouse. We're plain folk, but well thought of. There's no nonsense about Lusters, and never was. If gentry comes into my house they must do as we doos." Therefore Millie had no option, she had to clean and pack the eggs or lose the pat of butter she got at trade price for Walter,

because it was necessary to tempt the boy's fitful appetite, she was told.

The little Lusters were not gifted, nor was their thirst for knowledge insatiable. They were not interesting or well-mannered children, and such mind as they possessed was set upon out-door interests and occupations, so that Millie found the hours passed in the school-room long, and as the dinner-hour was utilized by Mr. Luster for setting the children puzzling questions in mental arithmetic, their incapacity to answer which implied reproach to their unlucky instructress, who was herself completely puzzled by them, this interlude was as fire to frying-pan.

Yet Millie's tears were not because to-morrow must bring another long day of toil so cheerless and fruitless, but rather because a few more morrows would end such day-labour, and with it the daily meal and the scant payment that made such a difference to the family resources.

> "Oh! the little more, and how much it is,
> And the little less, and what worlds away!"

Millie quoted to herself, half in scorn of

grief from so mean a cause. Little Buckley was not Paradise, but there was no other work to be found within a walk of home.

Her sisters envied her the privilege of living at home, though their salaries were larger, and their work pleasanter, than hers. Ethel was a hospital nurse; Amy a teacher in a large ladies' school. Ethel had only a fortnight's holiday in the year; Amy nearly three months. Millie's life, spent at home the whole year round, seemed all holiday in comparison with theirs. So it was no wonder that Millie looked tired and dowdy when she came in to tea, after the long day begun with the rainy, muddy walk.

When the silver watch told her the practising time was over, she was glad. For when one has no especial musical talent, little musical knowledge, and fingers swollen by chilblains, the piano, played in a fireless room, by the light of a small but odoriferous hand-lamp, is not an inspiriting instrument, however conscientiously cultivated, and with whatever dim and confused imaginings of wealth to be won in consequence of such cultivation. Wealth to comfort parents' de-

clining days, to provide luxuries for sick brothers and perhaps send them to Oxford —at the risk of branding them with the priggish superiority sometimes acquired at that ancient seat of learning.

Neither was Mr. Ray wont to be sorry when this musical exercise was finished; for the walls were thin, and the sound of scales and diligently practised runs and shakes and lively tunes are not conducive to the study of theology or the construction of thoughtful sermons and cottage lectures. But that night he scarcely observed when the piano was shut and Millie, blue with cold, had stolen into the parlour, drawn a little table to the other side of Walter's couch, and, without speaking, begun a studiously noiseless game of chess with him.

The familiar scratch of Mr. Ray's pen was unheard to-night. He shaded his eyes with one hand and in the other held a pencil, with which to make notes. The large Bible was open before him, and he occasionally, though rarely, perused a page of the book of Job, from which to the silent chess-players his gaze alternated, while he sat motionless and

absorbed, as if carved in stone. Once Mrs. Ray rose softly and softly mended the fire, but he did not stir.

The cheap little clock on the mantel-piece ticked on in loud and fussy self-assertion; the long hand went round the dial; cinders dropped with a faint tinkle; little flames flapped in the grate; Mrs. Ray's needle clicked steadily; the kitten's soft purr was heard; now and again a piece was moved audibly on the chess-board, and a whispered "check" spoken by the players; once or twice Buffie, stretched sleeping before the fire, yapped in a faint microscopic way in his dreams—other sound there was none. Ah! yes, there was one—one that dominated all—tore at the father's heart and made Mrs. Ray sigh and glance anxiously from her work to the chess-players. This was the short, hollow cough, that from time to time shook Walter's frail body.

"And Lord Woolford gave twenty-five pounds to buy that credence table," the poor curate reflected. *That* table, not only superfluous, but, to his sturdy Protestantism, dangerous, if not Popish. How much would

a sunny spring in the south of France or Italy cost?

"Mate!" shouted Walter at last, forgetting the rules of silence in his exultation; but he was not rebuked.

Bella was summoned from her cinders (whence her occasional name, Cinderbella), and family prayer performed, after a short little exhortation on the efficacy of prayer. Then Walter was carried up to bed by his father and cosily tucked up and fed with warm milk; the family supper of bread and cheese was handed round, Millie seized five minutes to look at a book, and her mother to glance at a paper; but Mr. Ray still sat before his open Bible behind his rampart of theology, silent, and praying, praying, praying—for twenty pounds.

When the house was still and the inmates asleep, Mr. Ray waked and watched on his bed, still praying for the means to save his only son. His wife, tired by the busy day of household duty and parish cares, slept peacefully at his side; frosty stars looked in at the window, a waning moon rose, shone out and was shrouded in sudden

storm-wrack. Millie in the next room was dreaming, dreaming that she was governess to the Czar's eldest son and that Walter, healed and hearty, was coming out first-class at Oxford; but Mr. Ray prayed and prayed on till he fell asleep in his prayer, and knew nothing more till the grey wintry dawn came, and he woke to find his wife already risen, and sounds of household duties telling him it was high time to be up.

Saturday morning, and no sermon begun for Sunday; yet there was a great calm in his heart. The long and strenuous prayer had relieved the overstrain of emotion. Was it right thus to pray for a definite thing, a mere earthly solace? Never thus had he prayed before, never thus, he hoped, would he pray again; he would trust more. *Fiat voluntas tuas*—henceforth that should be his prayer, that was enough; it might have been that he had sinned in the passion of yesterday's grief, and had prayed amiss. "*Fiat voluntas tuas*," he repeated as he entered the dingy parlour, where the fire burned cheerily, the kettle sang, the kitten sported gracefully, the little dog danced, and the

frugal meal and the affectionate wife awaited him.

"William Ray, William Ray," all around him seemed to say, "be no more faithless, but believing. Leave a deeper, diviner love to care for that only son of frail human affection, and be still."

Millie came in and wished him good morning. Her face was worn and pinched, and she seemed tired already; he had not observed her closely of late—perhaps he had neglected her, selfishly and unjustly absorbed in his care for that cherished boy. It suddenly came into his mind that Millie's life was hard and over-grey for her youth. "My dear," he said, "you are not unwell, I hope?"

No, she was quite well, she replied, flushing with pleasure at the unwonted tenderness, quite well, and as for being worked too hard, she should be wretched without plenty of work. Nothing was so dull as idleness. So saying, with a transfiguring smile on her face, she arranged the books for morning prayer; the family took their places, and then, the usual devotions having

been performed, Mr. Ray opened the well-worn Bible Millie placed before him, which remained always ready for the purpose on a certain shelf with the blotting-pad and inkstand.

He opened it—that is to say, he took it in his hand and it fell apart in a much-thumbed place in the Gospels — and remained gazing in awed silence and fearful joy, with a strange and solemn radiance on his face, for a measurable space of time. Then he suddenly fell on his knees in his place, signing to the family to do the same, and offered up a fervent thanksgiving for extraordinary mercies and prayers answered, while the Bible remained open on the table before him.

Between the pages, and by comparison small, so that none but he observed it, lay a thin, clean, crisp slip of elaborately watered, figured, and printed paper. Clinging to it, and separated by the tremulous motion of the fingers that touched it, was a similar slip, —they were Bank of England notes for ten and twenty pounds respectively.

CHAPTER III.

NEVER for one moment did Mr. Ray question the miraculous origin of those accurately printed and quite genuine Bank of England notes, with their numbers and abounding detail. The age of miracles was not past; he had faithfully, strenuously, and humbly, in fasting and watching, begged a certain sum of money from his Maker, and there, between the leaves of his Bible, lay that very sum, together with a certain divine overplus. What could be clearer or more simple?

Yet there was something awful in the very greatness of this mercy, before which his simple spirit bowed; so august an event, so heavenly a distinction, was not lightly to be told, even to his wife. No, he could not tell her yet—what were they that a miracle should be worked for them? He stood upon holy ground; he put the shoes from

off his feet and prostrated his soul in sacred reverence before this great mystery—the divine nature stooping to the need of poor humanity. Yet were the miracles of sunrise, and of daily food upon his table, as great and solemn evidences of divine care and forethought. But usual marvels do not impress.

> "Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

For the spirit of man is too feeble, and too much cramped and cabined by its sensuous hull, to rise often or for long to a full sense of the Divine presence, of which the tangible universe is the garment to make it visible, or in Goethe's words, "the living robe of the Godhead."

Yet this great thing, the positive sensuous assurance of that spiritual presence which works beyond and above the ken of sense, had befallen William Ray, even as it befell Moses when the bush flamed unconsumed before him, and as it befell Elijah on the lonely mountain, when, after earthquake, fire, and tempest, he heard the still small voice.

Uplifted in soul, thrilling with holy emotion, quivering with joy, yet calm and solemn, this single-hearted man accepted the glory that had come to him through a channel so small and poor, clearly apprehending the nobler meaning of those timely loaves and fishes, and meeting the day's trivial round as usual, though with a deepened sense of the sublimity and significance of life.

His family were ignorant of the signal mercy and answer to prayer for which they were bidden to give thanks; and, though they heard him read in an unusually moved voice of the miracle of the loaves, and observed the unearthly light upon his face, they were neither surprised nor agitated. During this reading, indeed, Mrs. Ray caught herself considering if the cold beef would last for Sunday, bearing in mind the fact that Millie would dine at home on both days.

This poor lady was aware that her temptation was that of Martha, to whom her husband sometimes likened her. To correct this, her chief frailty, one of her daughters had been commissioned by her father to illuminate the words in which Martha's

immortal rebuke was conveyed to her, and this illumination had been placed conspicuously over Mrs. Ray's bedroom mantelpiece in such wise that she could not fail to see it from her bed or on her lying down and rising up. She was indeed cumbered with much serving, and careful and troubled about many things, yet not less mindful of the one thing needful than many less heavily burdened.

"Going out, and your sermon not written!" was her amazed comment upon her husband's announcement to that effect after breakfast. Whereupon he smiled and said that his sermon was ready in his heart.

"Well, dear, I do hope you will at least not try to preach extempore," she returned; "the congregation won't stand it; besides, your nerves will be all to fiddle-strings. Still, if you are really going to Wilchester this morning, you may as well get me a packet of that excellent tea they sell at Winslow's; it is quite reasonable, as well as superior to any we can get here."

"Martha, Martha!" he said with half playful rebuke. "Yes; my dear, you shall have

your tea. But learn to trust, learn to trust more."

"I wish the grocers would," she thought. She revered her husband as a man of saintly life and unworldly heart, but she could never lose sight of the fact that dinners were as necessary and expensive to saints as to the most sinful of mankind. And perhaps she was not far wrong in holding it a serious duty to set the most suitable food she could get before her husband, a homely duty that was the daily source of much warfare to her soul and much weariness to her flesh.

"I wouldn't be a Martha if I could afford to be a Mary, William," she observed, while moving about and clearing the breakfast-table.

"But only one thing is needful, dear Edith," he returned with a tenderness that carried the worn and life-wearied woman back to the golden days of youth and romance, when she had indeed been a Mary, and the penniless young curate had been to her as one of heaven's youngest-eyed angels, but lightly draped in mortal flesh, with wings only half veiled.

Lost in the pleasantness of that brief retrospect, she pursued the homely task to which she had not been born, still with an under-current of speculation on the cold beef, when she espied and picked up a man's handkerchief from behind the door. Thereupon her vexed imagination straightway pictured her husband bereft of that necessity and symbol of civilisation through half a wintry day, and she looked out of the window to see if it were possible to send Bella after him with it. But she quickly perceived that the handkerchief was of daintier fabric than Mr. Ray's, and, on closer examination, found a delicate, scarcely perceptible odour as of white rose. The initials, G.R.B., proclaimed that it was certainly not her husband's, but had probably been dropped by Mr. Burroughes the night before, whereupon, with Martha-like tidiness, she placed it in a large envelope and sealed it, ready for an opportunity to send back.

Mr. Ray, in the meantime, arrived in Wilchester, which was some five miles distant, by the most ancient and obvious method of locomotion, and did not forget his Martha's tea.

He changed one of the miraculous notes into cash, not without a faint shudder, as if at sacrilege committed, when the crisp and snowy paper was fingered carelessly by the cashier as a thing of no importance. For one giddy moment it seemed like bartering consecrated wine; then he remembered the twelve baskets of fragments gathered up by special command, that nothing might be lost. A deep uncomprehended feeling made it impossible to change the note nearer home. Perhaps it was a reverent fear of degrading the day's sacred and sublime experience to the level of common talk which impelled him to guard his august secret and fence it about with an impenetrable Isis veil of reticence.

The day being mild and sunny, he longed to take Walter for a drive forthwith, the more so as it was Millie's half-holiday, and she might go with him. But in his simplicity he was shy of launching out too extensively at first; he imagined his parishioners stupefied with amazement at sight of himself and family flaunting about in carriages. Yet when, after a simple repast of bread and cheese, he reached home towards dusk, laden with a

bottle of good port, a chicken, and such like, for Walter, it must be confessed that there was a momentary regret, deep down in his heart, that he had specified a sum which, when he came to think of laying it out, was inadequate for his purpose.

But how was that momentary lack of faith and gratitude rebuked, when, on entering his home, he was greeted by his wife, radiant with pleasure and excitement.

"Dear William," she said, having opened the door in the dusk for him and given him a welcoming kiss, "you were right. Man's necessity *is* God's opportunity. Oh! my dear, I will try to have faith as you have."

Then in the dingy parlour, now warm and cheery in the firelight, the events of the day were poured into the curate's astonished and delighted ears. First, the arrival of a case of fine old crusted port, addressed in an unknown hand, to the Rev. William Ray, with best wishes for Master Walter's better health, and concerning the sender of which no information whatever was obtainable. Next, the equally unexpected advent of a barrel of oysters in the same mysterious

manner. More surprising still, a letter by mid-day post, containing the first half of a banknote for five pounds, addressed in type-writing, and with the type-written intimation that the second half would follow by the next post.

"They might have kept their beastly oil, though," observed Walter, referring, with a grimace, to a large bottle of that nourishing and expensive, but singularly nauseous stuff from the cod's liver. "No wonder they do good by stealth. I should think they just *would* blush to find *that* fame."

"Walter," exclaimed his father, "this is no time for jesting. He who feeds the young ravens and prepared a table for David in the wilderness, sends these things for your need. My boy, you must strive to be worthy of these signal mercies. Edith, do you remember our faithless fears of yesterday, with what difficulty we strove to believe what I then said, 'The Lord will provide'? He *has* provided. Let us give thanks."

"But still, dear William," urged Mrs. Ray, when this act of worship was done; "we must not be unmindful of the human channels

through which divine mercies are permitted to flow;" here she looked at Millie, who blushed, and she thought of the warm overcoat so much desired for Walter, exactly fitting him and with a fur collar singularly like the muff her daughter's godmother had given her the year before, but which, of late, had mysteriously ceased to comfort Millie's chilblained hands. This coat had been amongst the shower of good things descending upon Walter on that eventful day. "The age of miracles is past," she added.

"Woman!" cried Mr. Ray, with an austerity that went through the family like a thunderclap; "*Dare* you say so? The age of miracles is *not* past."

Then Mrs. Ray, remembering Millie's scanty resources and generous self-denial, agreed with her husband in her heart, though she decided to acquaint him with the particular human channel of the coat. And Millie had a great mind to divulge the secret of the oysters, that she knew to be due to Nurse Ethel's slender purse.

It was now time for Mr. Ray to display his purchases, briefly observing aside to his

wife that they were a direct answer to prayer Thus the family rejoiced.

Bella broke two tea-cups for pure gladness; the kitten, in mad merriment, flew round after its tail until it looked like a swiftly spinning wheel of grey fur; Buffie picked everybody's pocket in succession, and had to be seriously rebuked. And then all at once, as Mrs. Ray was handing his first cup of tea to her husband, she observed a strange grey pallor on his face, and saw him sway from side to side and fall helpless.

Excitement, strong emotion, the long walk, insufficient food, talking at the parochial visits he had paid along the road, together with the climax on reaching home, had wrought upon the old man's declining strength and produced a faintness, from which he was soon recovered. But his wife remembered that swoon long after, to her abounding sorrow.

Millie had not yet told her parents of her private trouble—she could not bring herself to dash their pleasure on this exciting evening. Nor did she tell her father of her afternoon's visit to the Rectory and its osten-

sible cause—the restoration of George Burroughes' pocket-handkerchief.

No one made much account of the handkerchief episode. In the first place, the handkerchief had not been missed; for when Burroughes stepped into his own hall on the previous evening, his servant had observed that his master's coat was splashed with mud; and George had taken it off there and then and given it to the man to clean, going upstairs in his shirt-sleeves to dress. The first thing he did on reaching his room was to sit down in his impulsive way and write to Lord Woolford that he could not, would not, and should not ask Mr. Ray to leave, much less discharge him. This done, and the letter sent straight to the post, he dressed and went down to dinner in the highest spirits.

"Well, George!" asked the cousin maligned by Millie Ray for the crimes of high hand-shaking and a society manner, "and what did his high mightiness, the Marquis of Carabas, otherwise Woolford, say?"

"The usual rot!" returned her cousin, with elegant brevity. "By the way," he

added, as if by an after-thought, "he is going to stand us the credence-table."

"My dear," exclaimed his mother, "how generous and how delightful!"

"George's notion of rot!" observed his cousin, showing some pretty white teeth between full red lips. "My dear auntie, could any one but a clergyman be so stolidly ungrateful? Really, George, you are quite too refreshing. First you pick the poor man's pockets——"

"Not I. Why, the old beggar is rolling in riches. A little bleeding would do him good. But I didn't beg, Maud, upon my word, though it would have been a holy and pious thing to make him shell out. I merely said the thing was wanted, and he came down with his dust like a shot. After all, what's twenty-five pounds?" observed the callous George.

"Well, it's a pony, isn't it?" returned Maud; "at least, so Jim says."

"He'd put it on a card at baccarat and lose it with a grin. He gave me a second pony, as Maud calls it—very antiquated slang, Maud—towards church repairs, mother."

"Robber! Auntie, what have you to say to this clerical Jack Sheppard? The moment he meets a rich, but honest marquis, up goes the ecclesiastical pistol, and the unlucky nobleman is ordered to stand and deliver."

"Oh! he'll go to heaven the lighter," added the unblushing rector, while his mother merely laughed a silent, contented, inward laugh, that made her diamonds shiver their light into little rubies and emeralds.

"It was a mercy that George wasn't ordered to stand and deliver with all this booty upon him, Maud," she said tranquilly.

"I don't know; a mercy for his reverence, perhaps. What have you done with your loot, George? I wish I'd been talking to rich marquises, I'm so desperately hard up, I'm positively going about in rags."

"Chiffons are a good deal worn, aren't they? Well, you shall have a new gown if you're a good girl. I bought a dozen yesterday for the almshouse widows, half-a-sovereign apiece, of the best black bombazine. I'll make it a baker's dozen and give you one."

"I should like to know where he's put all this gold, auntie, shouldn't you?"

"It was notes, not gold," George corrected. "By the way, I hope to goodness I haven't put them—oh! yes, I remember, it's all right. Yes, mother, it's quite true, cheques *have* been blown off my study table into the geranium bed, and it will be cast up against me to the day of my death—but I draw the line at notes, I assure you."

"And nothing will make him divulge the hiding-place, after kindling one's avarice," added Maud. "Jim says——"

"Jim!" growled George with indescribable contempt, "Jim!"

"What of Jim?" returned Maud, with a smile of angelic innocence.

"Only if I were in your place, I wouldn't quote him *quite* so openly, that's all," he said, with an expression of hopeless and injured misery.

Miss Ascott's picturesquely cut corsage quivered—a square cut was then in vogue—and the string of pearls clasping her round white throat shot many soft lights abroad.

She bent her nicely fringed and curled dark head over a glass, from which she pretended to drink, and then looked up with the most innocent gaze in her large velvety eyes. "Do you know," she said gravely, "you are *so* like Jim in some ways. 'Why in the world are you always quoting that fellow George?' cries poor dear Jim about once a week. One naturally quotes one's cousins, you know. But about this marquis now; he's rich, and a widower; I'm poor, and a spinster—why not *annex* this marquis?"

"You have, *pro tem*," muttered George, half pacified.

"We're to drive you over to Woolsden to luncheon," Mrs. Burroughes said. "What cares the Marquis of Carabas for old women and young clergymen?"

"He's about the biggest blackguard out," added George thoughtfully.

"Yet his gold adorns the altar and pious old curates are dismissed at his nod," commented Maud, placidly folding her plump white arms.

"No," said George, sitting up, squaring his shoulders and looking straight ahead

past his mother, "not that; Mr. Ray is *not* to be asked to resign."

"But, my *dear* George," cried his mother, "after all that Lord Woolford has said! And what *will* the Hintons say, and the Screwbys, and the Levesons? Then Mr. Ray's troublesome views, and the services that he continually spoils!"

"They may say what they will," replied George, throwing back his head, "Ray is worth the whole blessed lot put together!"

"But, my dear, you owe the living to Lord Woolford!"

"And a howling shame, too! that such a man should have church patronage!"

"Only listen to George defying the Carabasian thunderbolts!" commented Maud. "But you as good as promised him that Mr. Ray should go, George."

"I'm in a hole, a beastly hole," replied George, remembering the unlucky issue of King Herod's promise to the dancer, "but I've just written and told Woolford that the thing can't be done. If he can't say his prayers where poor old Ray spoils the intoning, he may say them in Rigden Church,

or Highdown, or anywhere he likes—and wherever he goes he'll say them under a worse parson."

"But no one questions Mr. Ray's merits," objected Mrs. Burroughes, roused to active interest; "it is his unsuitability to the parish that makes it so awkward. Elsewhere such a man would be a treasure."

"It's too late for the poor old fellow at his time of life to make a new start. He's sixty-five if he's a day," the Rector replied.

"He isn't a dey, he looks more like a knight," replied the unabashed Maud, who owned to a weakness for her cousin's curate. "I wish you would peel some walnuts for me, George; they are ageing, like poor Mr. Ray. Auntie, might I give you some of these white muscatels? Walter Ray likes these muscatels."

"Walter needs something better than grapes to keep him alive," said George, repeating the doctor's prescription and the trouble it had caused Mr. Ray, and describing the tea-table and the butter episode, while he peeled the walnuts.

"I cannot understand their extreme

poverty," commented Mrs. Burroughes. "I am afraid there must be bad management. We know that a hundred and fifty a year is not wealth, but still, there are but four to live on it. Millie Ray's salary must help."

"H'm!" growled George, holding his glass to the light and wrinkling his forehead.

"That has struck me too," added Maud, thoughtfully nibbling a candied peach; and then there was a brief silence in the pleasant and comfortable room, with its soft shaded lights, crackling wood-fire, flowers and well-selected, artistic plenishing—a briefer, less constrained silence than that in the Rays' dingy little parlour, where the evil-smelling lamp scarcely lighted the hushed family group, and where the curate was still absorbed in his unspoken prayer.

"I hope," said Mrs. Burroughes, drawing a shawl round her shoulders with a cosy shiver as she rose from the table, "I do hope there is a good fire in the drawing-room this raw night."

"I'll make you a roaring fire, auntie," said Maud, as they passed through the well-warmed hall; "I think you have taken a little chill."

Millie Ray was just then shivering through the cold and draughty passage, after her piano exercise, a very different spectacle from the rosy, round-limbed Maud in her jewels and picturesque attire. The latter's touch on the Broadwood grand was light, firm, and well trained, and her dreamy melodies charmed her aunt into a pleasant fireside slumber till George appeared, when there was a game of chess, sadly interrupted by the fun and frolic of the two cousins.

More music followed the chess, and George's fine voice was heard in "I fear no foe in shining armour" and "Adelaïde." And all the time in the dingy parlour, by the evil-smelling lamp and skimpy fire, Mr. Ray was praying—silently praying.

CHAPTER IV.

MILLIE RAY returned from Little Buckley on half-holidays, ostensibly before the mid-day dinner, but in reality, with the best speed she could muster, just as the family were finishing their repast; when the table presented a dishevelled and uninviting aspect, and the potatoes, jostled by rice pudding, and long past the alluring stage of smoking hot, were cold and soddened by condensed steam.

Had Millie been a boy, care would have been taken to keep a plate hot for her; but, being a girl, she scouted the idea of giving so much trouble, not that it had occurred to anybody to take it; besides, her mother would have been shocked to think that a daughter of hers could care about her dinner. So Millie never enjoyed what that singular people, the Yankees, call a square meal—by this adjective divulging their typical mental angularity and lack of the finish, suavity and

breadth indicated by things round—hence her body showed angles where winning curves should be. Meals were square enough for the hungriest Yankee at Little Buckley, it is true; but the mental pre-occupation supplied by Mr. Luster's (to Millie) hopelessly insoluble problem of how many men it would take to mow thirty acres of grass in a year, supposing ten could mow twenty in a month; or, supposing twelve cows to yield six pounds of butter a day, how many would yield forty in a week, was conducive neither to appetite nor digestion.

So Millie, having hurried breathless home, hurried through a pretence of cold beef and damp potatoes, then through the domestic duties sequent on the mildest repast to the ladies of a house unfurnished with the harmful, but not unnecessary, cook and parlour-maid, and then, after hurrying through some sort of toilet, finally hastened in the wintry air to the Rectory, arriving there with a nose of the unbecoming hue induced by combined indigestion and frost. She asked for Mrs. Burroughes, with whom she had an errand of strict privacy, and was

completely confounded and nonplussed at being shewn into the presence of the whole family.

"Oh! I came early because I wanted to see you," she explained, brusquely and breathlessly, to her hostess.

"What a singular reason for calling," Maud Ascott commented, after offering her hand in the high fashion which kindled such scorn in Millie, but which this aspersed lady accompanied with a cordial charm, a little spoilt by a dash of probably unconscious patronage.

"Yes; I had something to say," continued Millie, with the startled gaze and fierce manner of a young savage.

"How deliciously original!" said the gracious and dulcet-voiced Maud, to whom both words and looks were, in side-long fashion, addressed. "People *never* have anything to say when they call, especially at Freshford."

A mad desire to snub this serenely-smiling damsel, vested in conscious beauty, self-complacency, a tailor-made gown of marvellous fit and a waistcoat of Indian gold

embroidery, tortured Millie and made her scowl darkly, but ineffectually. She became conscious all at once of gloves now deprived of the sheltering muff recently converted to Walter's collar; she knew that a button had deserted them and the finger-tips were splitting; but knew not why these disasters forced themselves upon her attention at that precise moment.

Yet unobservant George Burroughes could have told her why. He could not help contrasting the two young women to the advantage of his cousin, whose plain gown so well set off her full yet supple figure, and threw up the warm hues of her face, her bright eyes and crimson lips, slightly parting to disclose pretty teeth.

From her superior height she seemed to be graciously hovering over the ungracious and dowdy Millie, whose attire had apparently been casually thrown upon her, and whose pinched features, hair smoothed flatly away from an unbecomingly exposed forehead, and crowned by a hat shaped to rise above fashionable fluffs, compared most unfavourably with Maud's confident bearing,

well-curled fringe, and level brows. Maud suggested opulence of youth, womanhood, and beauty; all of which in Millie were skimped and scant. Millie was like a colt running wild and ungroomed on barren moors; Maud resembled its sleek, well-broken sister, in shining silver harness, well fed, and fresh from a clean warm box. Yet there is promise in many a rough unbroken colt.

"How is Walter to-day, Miss Ray?" George asked. "I was sorry to find your father so anxious about him."

"Anxious? Poor father! he is never anything else about Walter."

"The only son, and so delicate," Mrs. Burroughes commented.

"Yes, my father would cheerfully see the rest of us fried for his dinner if it would make Wattie well," replied Millie; "and we would all three cheerfully jump into the frying-pan to save him. Poor Wattie! Mr. Burroughes, your book has made him so happy. He took it to bed, and has got some of it by heart already." Millie's face was changed now, the pinched look suc-

ceeded by an indescribable glow, the large eyes shining with a sweet steady light.

"Do you like Tennyson, Miss Ray?" asked George. "My cousin says he is too pretty and sentimental for her."

"Rather too fine and finicking," the latter added.

"Oh! Miss Ascott, finicking? I only know what Walter read out in his bed last night, and said off at table to-day, but I thought that beautiful—a revelation. Why, even my father, who thinks poetry dangerous and frivolous, unless it's very old or dry or Greek or sacred, liked this—at least, that part about 'lifting hands of prayer.'"

"Both for themselves and those who call them friend," George quoted, in a half-conscious growl of subdued bass. "You must give me the pleasure of lending you all Tennyson's works, Miss Ray," he added.

Millie smiled and declined. She had no time to read; was a working woman.

"Oh, come now, isn't to-day half-holiday? and are there no evenings?"

"Not for frivolous pleasures."

"But to-morrow is Sunday," urged Mrs.

Burroughes. "Surely that is a day of rest."

"Not to clergymen's families. Besides, my father's views are strict. All profane literature is put away from Saturday till Monday."

"Well! it certainly is a howling shame that you should grind in the Sunday-school after your week's work!" cried George, rising and pervading the apartment in his large and vigorous way.

"Sunday-schools have always struck me as a singularly vicious form of tyranny," added Maud, suppressing a yawn, putting her glass to her eyes and looking out of the window at something presumably of more interest than Sunday-schools.

"Because it is only busy, tired people who teach," added Millie. "It is not as if Sunday teachers were idle, smart people, who have nothing in the world to do all the week but amuse themselves."

"A nasty one for you, Maud," murmured her cousin, *sotto voce*, in passing.

"I think, as parson of this parish," he added aloud, "I must set up a Sunday class of Tennysonian readings for tired people.

What do you say, mother? Shall we enlist Miss Ray at once as head scholar?"

"Oh! If I had to preach," Millie burst out, "I should describe heaven as a place where people had time to read poetry and the last new novel, and there were no Sundays, and no parish, and no old clothes to mend, and people never lost their situations."

"Now, why that climax, Miss Ray, if one may ask?" said George with interest.

Tears were in Millie's eyes. The momentary self-forgetfulness, induced by enthusiasm, was gone. She was half-ashamed of her directness and force of speech.

"Of course, you have a right to ask what I am silly enough to talk about before people," she replied; "but I didn't mean to—that is—I came on purpose to—I mean, if Mrs. Burroughes had been alone. But I will come another day," she concluded, rising, and suddenly remembering the handkerchief. "This is yours; you dropped it last night," she said, abruptly giving George the parcel, which he took with an abstracted air and immediately forgot, placing it absently on

his mother's work-table, whence it subsequently travelled unopened to the limbo of her work-basket.

By this time the purport of poor Millie's visit was evident to the meanest capacity. So she was left to pour out her trouble, with which she wished not to distress her parents, into the ear of her hostess, who, she had thought, might be able to help her to find some employment near home.

"I don't care what I do," she said, "so long as I can do it. What can I do? Nothing in particular; but I'd do it with all my might. No, I don't know anything to speak of. I can sing a little; but I can't play the piano if any one is listening. I've read nothing but my father's old books. I can construe Virgil, and know the Latin Accidence; yes, I can read Latin, but can't write it; I know enough Greek to blunder through the New Testament, which I have by heart. Arithmetic I can do, if not mental. I think I could keep accounts—easy ones. I can cook and clean a house and do plain needlework. But the great thing is to find something near home. My father and

mother want me for so many things, and my being at home makes it much less dull for poor Walter. Besides," she added, as if from a strikingly original afterthought, "I like it."

"What a perfect young savage!" was Maud's subsequent comment to her cousin on Millie, whom she had previously seen only as part of a small crowd. "One knows that Freshford has not advanced since the year One. But I'd no idea it produced such oddities."

"Oddity," returned George with dignity, "is no word for a lady who is neither commonplace nor conventional."

"Well, not *exactly* conventional," Maud said. "She escapes that stigma, I admit. But, if Millie Ray is a typical specimen of the Freshford damsel, do let us have a tea-party of them while I'm here. It would be as refreshing as an ice in July. Fancy doing nothing whatever the whole Sunday long; not so much as a novel to bless oneself with. Between ourselves, my good George, I suspect my pet curate is a bit of a Blue Beard in his own house. Who shall find me a virtuous man? His price is above a brewer's

income, and when found he is sure to be more or less of a tyrant or a prig."

"Ray may be narrow, but he's thorough. But what right have such as we to criticise such a man as William Ray?"

"Pray, don't eat me up alive, George. On the whole, perhaps one would rather not dine with St. John the Baptist—with all due deference."

"Herod might give one better wine, my dear, and more variety of dishes; though at least one dish at his table was in dubious taste. People have the defects of their qualities."

"And the qualities of their defects. Do you like the qualities of mine, George?"

"I never see your defects. A charitable wink is all they extract from your devoted cousin."

"Maud," Mrs. Burroughes said, with unwonted seriousness that Saturday evening, before dinner, "I have one earnest request to make to you. Don't play with George."

"Play with him, my dearest Aunt Carrie? Not play chess with poor George?" with a piteous air of infantile distress.

"You may play chess, but not mate, with

him, my dear. Oh, it's all very amusing for you, no doubt; but it's death for a man like George. He has but one heart—a good one; *you* can get them by the dozen."

Maud laughed a laugh of intense amusement. "Poor dear George! Dear Aunt Carrie, don't you think he is nearly big enough to take care of himself? Don't be afraid. I shan't annex George's heart. It's far too tough and well-seasoned."

"Then, why tease him about your cousin Jim? See how jealous he was."

"Oh, that is no proof. What man can hear another quoted by a woman without mortal jealousy?"

"Not if she be a pretty woman and he in love with her."

"Pretty? That word belongs to old-fashioned Arcadia, dear. A woman must be rather more than pretty, and may be rather less, to influence a *fin de siècle* man. A pink and white simper on a big-eyed wax doll-face is nothing in these days. *Chic*, *savoir faire*, tact, manner, and dress, not clothes, these fetch the men of to-day."

"And you have them all, besides being

dreadfully handsome and entertaining," moaned the hapless mother. "But here he comes," she added, as the subject of their discussion sauntered in, abstracted and languid, *point device* for the evening, but with two long furrows on his broad brow and an eye that communed with the carpet instead of adoring the beauty of the well-attired Maud. Too well-attired, possibly, since her aunt had that evening suggested that she might with advantage dress a little less and wear a little more, and thus avoid causing great scandal to the parish-clerk, who had just encountered her in the hall, on his arrival with the Sunday hymns and christenings.

The evening's table talk, sustained by the ladies, with an occasional hardly-extracted monosyllable from the master of the house, languished and languished, until it came to a dead pause, ended by George with the following seemingly irrelevant observation :—

"Millie Ray is not such a bad-looking girl after all."

"On the contrary, she looked the pink of virtue and primrose of propriety," his cousin

replied. "No one would imagine her the heroine of a scandal, I suppose."

"Poor girl," added Mrs. Burroughes; "pity she's so shy. She has to leave her situation and wants to get another before her father knows she has lost this. The Screwbys are wanting a nursery-governess. I'm afraid they would not care to take Miss Ray, though."

"I don't know why," said George majestically, "the fact that a young lady's father is not a beneficed clergyman, and that she is obliged to work for her living, should expose her to contemptuous observations."

"My *dear* George, I meant nothing that was not most kind," exclaimed his mother, aghast. "Miss Ray called expressly to consult me about a situation, and wished you to be asked to help her, if you heard of anything she could do that was not derogatory to her father's position."

"Well, then, let's set up a companion for you, and have Miss Ray. What she wants is rest and a little amusement. The more I see of the Rays the better I like them."

"Does Mr. Ray still pray for you, George?" Maud asked gently; whereupon he blushed savagely. "To judge by results I should fear——"

"Maud!"

It is one of the weaknesses inseparable from human nature to resent one's moral and spiritual improvement being prayed for by a fellow-sinner, and George Burroughes had a good deal of human nature. Therefore he had been moved to unchristian wrath by Mr. Ray's kind proposal to perform this charitable office for him, on the occasion of a slight difference of doctrinal opinion between the two, in which Mr. Ray had too rashly assumed the reign of Cimmerian darkness in the mind, and worldly Gallioism in the heart, of his rector. Thinking of this to-day, with the memory of that piteous quiver in the old man's face, George regretted his wrath much and his mention of it at home more.

"That old man," he said within himself, "is gaining a great hold upon me: but I doubt if I shall ever be fit to black his boots."

"I suppose, mother," he said, in the course

of the evening, after another long silence. "that I ought not to deny you and Maud the pleasure of exulting over the folly and misfortune of a fellow-mortal——"

"George!" cried Maud, with inexpressible delight, "I *knew* you'd done something silly, I saw it the moment you came in. You've gone and proposed to Millie Ray."

"I don't know why," returned George, with another accession of injured majesty, "the name of a young lady, entitled on every hand to the profoundest respect, should be made the subject of perpetual jest. To me it scarcely seems in the best taste. I was merely going to observe, my dear mother, that I've lost Woolford's two ponies."

"His ponies! My dear George, I never saw him drive anything but horses in my life. I don't like you to have dealings in horse-flesh with a man of that stamp—it is scarcely clerical."

"Dear Aunt Carrie, it's quite the most clerical thing in the world, I assure you. This kind of pony has no legs, but takes to itself wings," Maud explained.

"If you have played me a practical joke,

Maud," continued George, "I think it has gone far enough."

"My dear children, what *do* you mean? What has Maud to do with strayed ponies?"

"Indeed I am innocent, George. Auntie, your son accuses me of stealing fifty pounds, that is all."

"Smithson is much upset," continued George, describing how Smithson had taken the coat, in the pocket of which was a letter-case wherein the notes had been placed, to brush, on the moment of his master's return, and how next morning the coat pocket had been found empty; further, how diligent search in every conceivable place in the house had discovered no trace of letter-case, letters, or bank-notes, and probably never would. "It's not so much the money," continued George, "but the domestic upset and suspicion. The servants will probably give warning to a man—that is, to a maid. And I must put it in the hands of the police. I've got the numbers in my note-book, luckily; that's one comfort, to be sure. Then there was half a sermon in the case—I meant it for to-morrow."

"My dear George, take comfort. Who knows but this may be the turning-point in the life of some poor, but dishonest thief. The reading of that half-sermon—by the way, don't you think you might have put the case in your overcoat pocket?"

But, being tormented neither by the sensation of red-hot coals consuming the bones, and rats gnawing the muscles, which mortals call rheumatism, or that of sharp knives stabbing, and red-hot wires jerking, the body and brain, known as neuralgia; never being convulsed and suffocated by asthma, strangled by laryngitis, or stifled by bronchitis, unaware that he possessed a liver, and blissfully ignorant from experience of the internal structure of the complicated organism, man, George habitually put nothing between himself and the weather but such garments as were visible; and, one of these being an M.B. waistcoat, a garment presumably not rich in pockets—as far as the lay mind can ascertain—and none of them an overcoat, they had few hiding-places in which a stout morocco letter-case might be secreted. And in that lost letter-case, he was beyond all doubt con-

vinced, he had placed the munificent gift of Lord Woolford, surnamed Carabas.

No one likes to lose fifty pounds, particularly if he can afford it; to the average male Briton, with red fighting blood in his veins, the sensation of being got the better of by robbers or otherwise is objectionable; but to the Rector of Freshford there was the further annoyance of having suspicion thrown on his household or his flock, and in particular on one already black sheep of the latter. He was, therefore, made wretched by the loss, and was to become more so.

"Now, George," said his cousin, after busy and patient discussion of the matter at the fireside, "you met the Marquis of Carabas at the club, and there commanded him to stand and deliver. In what room?"

"In the reading-room."

"Who else was present?"

"Oh! let me see; some farmer fellow, I think. No; they'd all gone out by the time Woolford came to the point."

"Was brought to bay, you mean. So you had no witnesses? Now, on receiving the notes, what did you do?"

"Well! I thanked him; that seemed on the whole the best thing to do."

"You'd better be careful, or you'll be committed for contempt of court. What did you do with the notes on making the unfortunate peer disgorge them?"

"Folded them in the pocket of the case, after taking the numbers in the note-book; then put the case in my pocket-book. They were tucked up in a bit of the sermon."

"Futile sermon, I fear! Did Lord Woolford see this done?"

"Probably not. He'd put on his glasses and was looking out of the window at the Screwby girls driving by."

"M'lud, this witness is incorrigible. Which left the apartment first; you or Lord Woolford?"

"As if I didn't know better than to precede a peer of the realm. Besides, age goes before honesty."

"This is irrelevant; confine yourself to facts. Now, are you quite sure you didn't slip the case outside your pocket instead of inside?"

"Dead sure. But I'll make inquiries at the club."

"Auntie—I mean m' lud—this is a point. The club ought to be put in the witness-box. Now, Mr. Burroughes, did you go to any other part of the club—smoking-room? Of course. The case may have been dropped there. And, on leaving the club, you walked down the High Street and called at the library. Good. And then you went to the Honeybuns'. Oh, George, and Honeybun just out of gaol! Nowhere else?"

"Nowhere. I came straight home, calling on the Rays, as you know, on my way. It is utterly impossible that I could have dropped anything from the pocket."

"That will do, witness. M' lud—that is, Aunt Carrie—this is the case for the prosecution. It must have been done at the Honeybuns'. You see it lies between them and the servants."

"I wish it did, then I could pick it up," said George. "Well! I can't do anything till Monday now, that's clear."

"An evening spoilt," commented Maud, stifling a yawn, as she rose to go to bed, "by three little bits of paper."

CHAPTER V.

NEVER before had the good folk of Freshford heard such a sermon from their curate as on that Sunday morning. Lord Woolford, consumed with wrath and indignation against the rebellious rector, was present (probably, the latter reflected, out of pure spite), deeply pondering the possibility of retracting his gift, since what he intended as its condition had been impudently disregarded by its recipient. But even the Marquis of Carabas' naturally rocky and unnaturally hardened heart was almost touched in its least indurated part by this sermon, and he went away grumbling to himself that, "After all, the beggar can preach, and young Burroughes is not such a fool as not to know what a stick he is himself."

"I always had a weakness for your curate, George," Maud Ascott commented, "but I had no idea he could preach like that."

As for George, he came very near to choking once or twice, and was glad of the shelter of his surplice, as he rested his elbow on the choir-stall during that morning's discourse. All the time his mental gaze was occupied by the piteous, helpless quivering of the old man's chin, and he heard his bitter, self-accusing cry, that he had put Walter before his soul and the souls of his people.

Yet it was difficult to believe that the old man, whose strong but helpless anguish and uncontrollable tears had so wrought upon George's heart in the chill twilit parlour two days ago, was the same as this erect, inspired preacher, pouring forth, without check or misgiving, the enthusiasm of a triumphant faith. All the dignity, but none of the weakness, of grey hairs was here; the man's eyes glowed with a deep and steady fire, his face was radiant with a light not of this world—like the first martyr's face, "as of an angel"—such light as illumines one who has beheld the Unseen and yet lived; his voice was full and deep, being naturally thin and plaintive, even reedy; his unsought words were choice and noble, and fell spon-

taneously into musical rhythm of nicely-balanced sentence; his imagery was simple and lofty, though, in spite of his wife's warning against extempore sermons, he had not so much as a note before him; but was preaching straight from his overflowing heart. Therefore his delivery was majestic and enchained attention.

There was to-day no hesitation, no near-sighted peering into manuscript, no groping after words, no timidity of expression, no fettering self-consciousness, no fear of being misunderstood. Tears there were, once or twice, the restrained tears of noble feeling—not the helpless overflowing of grief; but no faltering, no breaking of the steady voice, which rose and fell with unaccustomed and unpremeditated music and emphasis.

He exhorted the people to be bold in prayer, to pray even for little things. Nothing could be small or trivial in the sight of the Infinite, to whom the sparrow's wing and every hair on the disciple's head are as much objects of care as the starry universe with all its solar systems and galaxies of innumerable worlds; nothing could be small in the sight

of One to whom all things are small, and the nations a very little thing—a drop in a bucket. But to man, that frail and fleeting guest, who tarries but for a night and in the morning is no more seen, who doth fade as a leaf and is fashioned out of the dust to which he must so soon return, small things are often great; a drop of water, a few grains of powder, may be to him as life and death, being and not being. Therefore let no one hesitate to ask in faith for the meanest necessity. St. Augustine prayed once to be delivered from pains in his teeth. The Gospel miracles were wrought upon such things as pots of water, a loaf, a fish, a coin. Through such channels, so apparently trivial and homely, divine glory may be conveyed to the soul of man.

Therefore, let no Christian man conceal any lawful desire from his Maker, but express his every want in fervent prayer; for in those very needs and desires, sometimes strangely and unaccountably to the eye of flesh withheld from the just and devout, lies the medium through which the soul of man may most fitly and closely commune with the

Highest. Nay, let no man stagger at the thought, even the impossible, the earthly impossible, might be supplicated by the prayer of faith — that is, if the earthly impossible were needful and lawful. For the age of miracles is not past, and wonders are still daily wrought for the humble and devout; every day the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent empty away. Therefore, let all men pray, pray and pray, fervently, faithfully, humbly, and without ceasing;

"For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer,
Both for themselves and those that call them friend?
For so the whole round world is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God."

The prayer of faith is always answered; there is no shadow of doubt upon that subject.

Upon this he waxed fervent, speaking with a subdued exultation and meek triumph that carried his hearers away. And when he left the pulpit, he was like a man in a trance, unconscious of his own existence, with the rapt, transfigured look still upon his face and an unaccustomed dignity in his

bearing. Freshford Church was not visible to his far-off gaze; its solid pillars, its Saxon arches and secular stone walls melted into air; Heaven was opened, the Unseen made visible even to eyes of flesh. But of the customary evangelical shibboleth, of which the young rector was so intolerant, there was to-day no trace. For never before or after did Mr. Ray preach as on that Sunday morning in the uplifting of his thankful spirit.

George was so deeply impressed and subdued, that he scarcely ventured to speak to the man he had summarily discharged, and in sudden pity retained, two days ago. Silently he stood by him in the clergyman's vestry, when the offertory had been brought in and counted and the churchwardens were gone; silently he looked at the still rapt face and over-brilliant eyes that saw nothing earthly, and silently he wondered whence this sudden burst of eloquence and fiery exaltation had come. What if Isaiah had been, in his uninspired moments, a shabby, depressed, hesitating old man—with a shibboleth? For undoubtedly divine fire—the live coal from

the altar—must have touched those feeble and hesitating lips, used to utter platitude, shibboleth, and outworn phrase with painful effort and uncertain accent, before they could have poured forth that torrent of living, burning, triumphant, yet simple eloquence.

"Sir," said the young rector, with a deference unobserved by its object, "permit me—ah—your coat."

For Mr. Ray, sublimely heedless of sublunary matters, was faring forth into the February blast in the cassock with which he had so long and so stoutly objected to invest his evangelical form. He now submitted with a gentle smile and abstracted air to be helped out of this priestly vestment and into the coat and waistcoat of old-fashioned clerical cut, in his eyes so seemly, while George, observing that these were old and worn as he handled them, said gravely in his deep voice, "Thank you," to Mr. Ray's momentary wonderment.

George scarcely spoke at luncheon, during which phrases and sentences from the curate's remarkable sermon ran in his head and set up long and earnest trains of thought.

"But do you think he is right, George?" his mother asked, referring to the sermon. "Why, he would have us pray for a new gown or coat."

"I am incompetent to judge the words of such a man," George replied, "the least one can do is to listen humbly and dumbly."

And even Maud, the garrulous Maud, said nothing, but her eyes glittered with an unusual moisture, of which she was desperately ashamed.

The odours of the afternoon Sunday-school, well packed with scholars, were, by the time the preliminary hum of voices and clatter of footsteps had subsided, a prayer been said, and a hymn shouted by a hundred pairs of young lungs, anything but those of sanctity in the fastidious nostrils of Mr. Burroughes. When the last drone of the harmonium ceased, and the scholars stumped and rustled to their places, he took out a nicely-scented handkerchief, uttered a subdued "Pouff!" and looked round with "an eye like Mars" to see sundry urchins making faces behind teachers' backs, sucking contraband mint-drops, and distributing clandestine jokes,

pinches and kicks, and openly "cheeking" harassed and helpless teachers, displaying, in short, the varied charm and resourceful power of distracting inherent to the free and independent Sunday scholar, unfettered by week-day discipline.

Rapidly confiscating three pea-shooters, a catapult, a peg-top, some half-eaten apples and various sticky confections of sweet-stuff, standing two girls on forms, boxing the ears of three boys—he moved through the classes, scattering desolation and comparative good behaviour in his path, and reached the rear of Millie Ray's class of half-grown boys just as it had occurred to those pleasant fellows to bring all their nailed boots down in one simultaneous stamp on the wooden floor, with the delightful result of causing Millie to start visibly with a rush of tears to her tired eyes.

But a deep and angry "Stand all!" from behind them reversed the pleasantry, and made the jesters start in their turn and gaze with open mouths and eyes at the stern face and strong figure of George, who stood in their midst silent, and content with the silence he had created for a space.

"Freshford chivalry!" he observed acidly. "This is a pretty way of thanking ladies for giving up their time and comfort to a set of unlicked louts, with neither manners, gratitude, nor self-respect. Miss Ray shall not be annoyed in this manner. The class is disgraced."

Summary justice having, in spite of Millie's stout defence of her flock and plea of exceptional and extenuating circumstances, been meted out to these culprits, Millie was informed that Mrs. Burroughes wanted to see her that afternoon, and supplicated to convey a note from her son to that innocent lady, who had, it must be confessed, not the least desire for the society of a young lady whom she supposed to be decorously passing her Sunday afternoon in teaching in the school.

Millie was not very sorry to have the unexpected holiday afforded by her disgraced class; it was pleasanter to sit by a cheery fire in a comfortable chair and listen to Mrs. Burroughes and her niece and visitors talking. So pleasant, that she seemed scarcely to have been in the warm, flower-scented

atmosphere of the pretty bay-windowed room five minutes, when there was a sharp rustle of crisp evergreens outside, a quick step on the gravel, and George came in through the garden door and the little ante-room, and before Millie quite realised the situation, she found herself the centre of a cosy tea-party, flavoured by a spicy suggestion of Sabbatical unlawfulness. Two visitors besides herself, all talking as gaily as if Sunday solemnity had never been invented, secular books discussed, secular prints and photographs handed round, gentle explosions of laughter, references to mundane matters and occupations and week-day events; in all this Millie snatched a fearful joy, and caught herself thinking how much more spacious and airy life would be if Sunday was not a lost prison-day of dull vacuity out of church.

"Oh! I must go," she cried, in her abrupt way, when the visitors left.

"I don't see the need," George replied, helping himself with youthful recklessness to muffin. "You've not said a word to us yet. Nobody can when the Milfords are present. Delightful girls; any amount of go in them.

Besides, you can't go home alone, and I'm not half through my tea yet. Do have another cup and a scone. Maud, have you left me any pound-cake? Sunday makes us all as hungry as wolves."

"The unusual sense of virtue is so stimulating," Maud explained, drawing her chair closer to the fire. "I must say I like these quiet Freshford Sundays—for a change!"

The afternoon was drawing gloomily to an end, with a dank fog, that made the trees drip and emphasised the comfort and warmth of the bright and glowing room. Millie's chair was a magnet to her tired body; another cup of tea quieted her nerves more completely; the voices of the cousins fell with subduing charm on her ear; she watched the lights quiver and flash from the rings on Mrs. Burroughes' placidly clasped hands; a sudden sense of happiness, or, perhaps, more truly, of possibilities of happiness, fell upon her.

The cousins' voices ceased; an angel must have passed by, for they were all contentedly silent—so silent, that the clock's steady ticking, the crackle of flame and tinkle of falling cinders within, and tap of frosted

sprays on the windows and rustle of evergreens without, were audible.

"'As a rule,' George observed, abruptly breaking the pleasant silence at last, 'girls are worse liars than boys.'"

"My *dear* George!" exclaimed his mother, startled from agreeable musings.

"Especially at from twelve to fifteen," he continued. "Purposeless lying, I mean, and seemingly unconscious. A boy seldom reels off an unnecessary yarn for the pure pleasure of it."

"His reverence discourses on lying," his cousin commented. "My good George, is this the evening's rehearsal?"

"The afternoon's reminiscence," he replied; "*Apropos* of which, I think, Miss Ray, that you ought to know what outrageous romances that little Bella of yours makes about you. She ought to be checked."

"Oh! but Bella is truth itself, Mr. Burroughes," Millie objected.

Then it came out that Bella, in the Sunday-school, held up her hand at a question for an instance of answered prayer, and said that her master had prayed overnight for certain

things, which things had been sent him next morning—a warm coat, a barrel of oysters, a basket of wine, and a chicken. Whereupon, being sternly told not to publish what went on at her master's house, Bella wept and lamented herself.

"Poor child," Millie said; "but it is quite true. My father did pray very earnestly for means to procure comforts necessary for Walter's health, and these things actually came yesterday. You heard his sermon."

Millie spoke with matter-of-fact simplicity, as if confirming the most ordinary piece of intelligence. Her listeners were silent. The cinders tinkled softly, the evergreens pattered lightly, the rose-sprays tapped listlessly on the window-pane; a gust of wind rose and shrieked round the house, the clock ticked and chimed a musical quarter—Millie loved that clock. Maud Ascott rose and moved to the window with averted face; George coughed.

"My *dear!*" said Mrs. Burroughes at last, in a moved voice, to her young guest.

"We heard his sermon," George replied, with a blank-verse intonation.

"The things came anonymously, and at different times," Millie continued. "My dear father thinks they came straight from heaven. Not, of course, that it makes any difference how they came. He expects to have all that Walter needs. Oh! I *must* go."

Conscience sadly reproached Millie for the rest and quiet enjoyment of that Sunday afternoon. She had actually been out to tea, though without premeditation. She had been amused and refreshed; she had done no work whatever; unless she made haste she would not be in time to wash the family tea-cups, and her mother would have to do all herself. Walter had not had the dripping toast she had intended making him. How delightful life would be if things generally, and especially pleasant things, were not sinful.

The lamp smelt more strongly than usual that evening, and there was a curious desolation about the dingy parlour, in which she and Walter kept each other company while the family were at church. Millie dutifully read the psalms and lessons to her brother, also the evening prayers; but this did not take

long, and even during that short time her attention wandered more than once.

"It was kind of him, but I ought to have fought it out alone with the boys," she said, referring to the Sunday-school incident, and seeing George's indignant face and hearing the great change in his voice when he spoke to her. "Yes, he is a kind man, and I must say, Wattie, that it was very pleasant to get an unexpected holiday. I begin to like Mrs. Burroughes, and Maud Ascott improves on acquaintance—especially in conjunction with pound-cake and lovely tea with cream in it. One mustn't be prejudiced, Wat."

"You women are so whimsical," her brother piped in his small treble. "Old Burroughes always was a brick, only you wouldn't have it. Maud Ascott always was the jolliest girl out, only you couldn't see it. And they're no end of spoons on each other."

Millie stooped to pick up a cinder with the tongs, so that her face was reddened by the dull fire before which she was kneeling; but, in doing this, she upset the poker with a clatter in the immediate vicinity of

Buffie, who started from his slumbers with a squeal, and immediately had his ears boxed by the kitten, always on the look-out for an opportunity to plague him.

"Oh!" said Millie, thoughtfully arranging the fire-irons, and feeling as if everything had suddenly turned grey, "I hear people coming home from church, I think."

It occurred to her that she was very tired; no wonder that very gentle "You look tired" had escaped Mr. Burroughes in the afternoon. Strong, healthy men hate to see girls looking tired. But few strong men were kind and considerate as he; what low and tender tones were in that deep, hearty voice of his. A pitiful-hearted man, so good to Walter. Did the cousins' off-hand bantering manner to each other conceal deeper feelings?

Strange, Millie thought, that now and then in one's life a hundred unconnected circumstances combine to give a certain hour a charm which makes it stand out a lovely memory for a lifetime.

Perhaps it is the simultaneous absence of every kind of annoyance from some moment,

in the heart of which is a small nucleus of enjoyment—a warm and harmonious room full of pleasant people, nicely-creamed Pekoe in the nick of time for over-strained nerves, unexpected rest. Whatever it may be, the ever-recurring memory of that afternoon, with a man's deep voice and laugh sounding through it, was to Millie like going out of damp, choking fog, into the warmth and perfume of some beautiful and well-lighted home. Meanwhile the world remained grey and grim.

"Going without one's dinner *is* hard lines," George Burroughes grumbled half an hour later, helping himself to a noble portion of cold game-pie from the Sunday supper-table.

"Especially on the hardest working day of all, when one most needs support," added his sympathetic cousin, cosily consuming her second cheese-cake. "How I wish you would have had another helping of beef, George. It's so delightfully supporting to see you making beef vanish. One is fed vicariously."

"As for people who live upon jam-tarts

and whipped cream! well! well! moral fibre is not to be expected of such persons, is it, mother?"

"I know nothing, my dear, but that I want a custard and some claret. I have no fibre left of any description, moral or immoral."

Silence ensued; the partridge-pie was entombed and succeeded by a goodly hunch of apple-tart, which in its turn went the way of all meritorious cookery. Then the following pregnant observation escaped the meditative rector, "Brown eyes are the best, so womanly, so expressive, always soft."

His cousin's were nearly black, comparable by her admirers to purple pansies.

"Millie Ray has brown eyes," she said composedly, "nice, honest, brown eyes; doggy eyes, some people would call them."

"Well! Of all the unholy, the howlingly inappropiate, comparisons," growled George, roused from pleasing reflections. "I think *that* young lady's eyes need not be discussed. Really, my dear cousin, really! really!"

CHAPTER VI.

FEBRUARY was passing; birds were nesting; the pathetic gladness of mild sunny days shining on a bare, storm-drenched earth, like the gladness of mourners trying to take heart again after long grief, had come.; nature was stirring softly in her sleep beneath the sun-rays, as the dreaming Adonis stirred when the shadow of returning Venus fell on his thrilled breast.

"I loathe this languid, enervating air!" muttered George Burroughes, snatching off his clerical felt hat, and letting the moist west wind play through his stubborn curls and over his broad forehead, now lined with care. "Just one good rousing week of Charles Kingsley's wild north-easter to stir the viking's blood—or the donkey's—the fool's—the idiot's, who can't take charge of a bank-note without setting his whole parish by the ears. Why did I come to this

beastly place? Why was I taken in by cant and hypocrisy? I? Good Lord! I must be the biggest fool going. That beast Woolford may well sneer. He'll have the pull over me now, and no mistake."

"Caw! caw! caw!" came raucously on the quiet air; a string of solemn black rooks rose from a field of young corn, on which they had been gloriously but thievishly banqueting, and flapped themselves sedately homewards, their wings flashing as they moved.

"Oh, you solemn hypocrites, black-coated, parsonic thieves, with your maws crammed full of Farmer Luster's corn and your marauding beaks full of wise saws and self-complacent prate. Caw, you clerical blackguards, caw! It's the way of the black-coats. Give me some honest Dick Turpin, some frank Bill Sykes, with his unmistakable hang-dog face and fine candid oaths and thieves' patter; but deliver me from the whole sneaking, preaching, pious, black-coated tribe. Oh! let's swear,—drink,—gamble,—heaven help me! for I'm a sinful man, and more than half a pagan!"

He leant his elbows on a stile and buried his face in his hands, while the garrulous brotherhood of rooks flapped and floated sedately above him, uttering their soothing, complacent caws, as they guilelessly congratulated themselves on the fine feeding they had that day achieved in the intervals of the annual spring cleaning and house decorating, incumbent on birds so respectable.

The last black splash had disappeared from the clear blue overhead and the caws were dying away in the distance, when George lifted his head and frowned at the translucent green of young corn blades before him. "Heaven knows," he said to himself, "I've never been so hard bestead before. It's the worst hole I ever was in in my life. But it *has* to be done."

Then he turned and strode up the down in the slanting sunshine, his eyes bent downwards on the soft springy turf, his ears heedless of eddying larks and piping thrushes, until he reached another stile, set in a wind-shaven, lichen-gilded hedge, and stopped there in the shadow of a gnarled and twisted thorn.

She would be there before long, he knew, and then, why then, the thing must be done. He pulled the felt hat down over his brows and listened with a beating heart and close-pressed lips for the light steps of the girl he expected, his heart throbbing more quickly and strongly every minute. He felt that he could meet her more easily and calmly under the shelter of the crabbed old thorn than out on the open down.

A faint rustle that must be her approach made his brain throb with his heart and struck him speechless, scattering to the four winds the sentences he had so carefully rehearsed. But it was only the faint sibilation of the wind in dry bents and short grass, and the rattle of thorn-branches overhead.

> ——"Were it ever so airy a tread,
> My heart would hear her and beat,
> Were it earth in an earthy bed.'"——

But *she* was no tall and stately maiden "in gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls;" this was no scented rose-garden in a warm, waning summer night or daffodil dawn; at this gate was no passion-flower to let fall a

splendid tear, no listening larkspur or waiting lily, only a flowerless, leafless thorn and damp earth-smelling turf.

She was in fact only Millie Ray, just released from Farmer Luster's dingy schoolroom, where she had been busy the livelong day, handling greasy slates and much-thumbed and evil-smelling grammar and history books, and patiently pressing the three celebrated *r*'s upon several stolid and reluctant young brains, with one break for a dinner, of which mental arithmetic formed the principal and, to her, strikingly unpalatable and indigestible dish.

Millie came over the down in the pleasant soft sunbeams with a dancing step, glad to be free of the schoolroom, and glad for many other things. So many cares had been lightened since the eventful day of the curate's answered prayer; Walter was growing stronger, his father had some mystic hoard of unknown wealth, which procured many hitherto undreamed-of comforts and luxuries for the lad—even country drives, in which the whole family had, with much benefit, shared. Her father was happy and hopeful, her mother

cheerful, an indescribable aroma of hope and gladness pervaded the pinched and narrow little home, which in these days was not without a tinge of romance. There were other elements of happiness—elements of which Millie was but vaguely conscious, and which imparted a roseate hue to greyest facts and gave a zest to everything, revealing a thousand unsuspected beauties and delights in the commonest things of daily life. "Heaven lies about us," truly, but not "in our infancy," and the glory-clouds "are trailed" indeed, but not in childhood; rather when manhood and womanhood begin to bud and blossom with the glow of early maturity; then, as Schiller says—

> "Das Auge sieht den Himmel offen,
> Es schwelgt das Herz in Seligkeit."

So Millie Ray stepped lightly over the short down turf in the slant sunbeams, happy with the deep unconscious happiness that comes but once in life, and melts away when it once knows the reason why, because it "looks before and after, and sighs for what is not."

George saw her now, and some old English poetry floated through his brain—

> "I sawgh hir daunce so comelely,
> Carol and synge so swetely,
> Laughe and pleye so womanly,
> And loke so debonairly,"

and his heart was ready to break.

Millie was not attired like the Duchess Blanche; her hair was not like "fine golden wyres," though it gleamed in the ruddying sunbeams. She caught sight of the stalwart figure beneath the twisted thorn and her heart gave a great bound, the blood flew madly over her face, the song she was singing in pure unthinking gladness broke off abruptly; she stooped to pick a flower—it was Chaucer's own loved "daisy, or els the deye's eye"—and tried to order and calm the quick, wild, happy throbbing in her breast.

For why do young men wait for young maidens beneath thorn trees in pleasant spring days? We all know, but we don't reason about it. We don't ask why the tiny common flower, so prized of poets, so deeply loved and seldom gathered, classed as a weed, trodden daily by the "dull clown's

clouted shoon," springing unbidden on every soil, is the first darling of our infancy, embroiders the else unblossomed green of quiet and nameless graves, and is dearer to man on the whole than any other mortal flower.

Therefore Millie Ray did not think or reason why her heart throbbed with unspeakable joy; she picked the crimson-edged scentless flower, and walked with a more sedate step towards the fateful thorn, her eyes bent upon the tiny white disk in her hand, as if it were some newly-discovered marvel of the flower world, and grew happier with every step she took.

George left his posture of utter dejection with a suppressed groan, pushed his hat to its usual level, and looked at the slim young figure with the down-drooped eyes advancing in sunlight, her shadow stretching far behind her.

She wore the same garments as when he called her dowdy, but she wore them with a difference; it must be confessed that she had of late taken to study that confidante, torment, and counsellor of young womanhood, the harmless and necessary looking-glass, and to compare its just reflections with

living facts that met her eyes in the streets; she had acquired the art of sticking a pin here and a stitch there—just there and nowhere else—that makes all the difference between dressing and merely wearing clothes. There was something new in her bearing, a fresh grace in her young undeveloped figure. There was a light in her face, happy curves that took off its thinness; to-day there was even a delicate wild-rose flush. Then, the day being fine, the Sunday hat, gradually declining to work-a-day uses with the waning winter, had been donned.

Now, when one has only two hats, and the work-a-day one has been wet through half-a-dozen times at least, besides having been blown, snowed, sleeted, hailed, and misted upon all the winter long, a Sunday hat is a pleasant thing to wear, especially when one happens to fancy oneself in it, still more especially when one happens to meet people one does not exactly dislike in it. Sunday hats are various; there is indeed nothing distinctive about Sunday hats as a class, nothing to differentiate them, for instance, from the everyday species. Of this specimen it may

briefly be observed that its chief distinction lay in its having nothing remarkable about it, that it fitted well and had been placed with care and counsel from a mirror upon thick, bright brown hair, and that it consisted partly of brown velvet, which harmonised with and increased the velvety softness of innocent brown eyes beneath it. It may be added that the proper effect to be produced upon the beholder by the ideal female hat is purely negative; it should inspire neither admiration nor the reverse, but simply and unobtrusively call attention to the best aspect of the wearer's face. Such was the effect produced by the subject of this digression upon George Burroughes.

"Poor child!" he said to himself; "poor dear child!"

"Oh! how do you do, Mr. Burroughes?" said Millie, with a surprised air, when she raised the brown eyes from the daisy and appeared to catch sight of George's troubled face for the first time, within a couple of feet of the stile. Then, to his surprise, George found himself stammering, and at a loss to account for his presence there, a fact which inspired shy Millie with superb calm.

"I—I thought you'd come this way," he blurted out, taking the inevitable parcel from her hands, and helping her to spring over the stile by the other, which held the daisy, to the detriment of the poor little flower.

"Well! you see, I usually come this way, because there isn't another," she commented, "except the high-road; but that's a good mile longer round."

"To be sure," he said absently. Then they stepped quickly and lightly over the turf, as if they were bound for the brilliant sunset of purple and gold and amethyst cloud bars on a lucid green sky, shining before them like gates of Paradise unfolding to admit them to its unspeakable charm.

Millie's heart throbbed on, her eyes softened with excess of light; both faces were luminous with the glory of the changing sky. George said to himself, "How can I begin? How can it be said?" Millie wondered if it were quite right to be so happy out of heaven. The sun's upper rim dipped in the shining sea; and the lower cloud-bars were ridged with fire.

"A very fine sky," he said absently,

"and not a bad look-out over the woods to the sea. You see it rather too often, don't you?"

"Oh, I could look at it for ever," she returned, with one of her old furious blushes. "By the way, has Honeybun confessed yet?" she added, ashamed of this enthusiasm.

"Honeybun is not guilty, Miss Ray," he replied solemnly in deepest bass.

"Oh! but how do you know?" she asked in quick surprise; "how *can* you know?"

"It is proved—proved to the very hilt. We have—I have—been unjust to Honeybun."

"Poor Honeybun! But, after all, it serves him right for having a bad character. How sorry my father will be!"

"For Honeybun's proven innocence?"

Millie's child laugh rippled out. "Oh, isn't it likely?" she said. "He will be sorry to have misjudged him, though."

"I trust that he may be," replied George, in a tone so grave that she turned a little and looked straight in his face with a gaze of utter surprise.

He did not return her gaze; he was looking

down, grave, preoccupied. The light of the western sky, wherein fire-edged islets of many colours and shapes were floating on a clear green sea, was reflected on his face. "I trust he may be, Miss Ray," he repeated with increasing gravity.

"May be? Of course he will be," she returned sharply. "Mr. Burroughes, what are you thinking of? For what do you take my father?"

"Dear Miss Ray," he replied more gently, but if possible more gravely, "I have taken your father for a saint. I have revered him as I have revered no other living man."

"And so you ought," she replied; "he *is* a saint. No other living man deserves so much reverence as he."

As Millie spoke the brilliance died from the sky; the burning islets turned grey on a luminous sea of pale primrose. The two young people turned, following the winding road, and faced a grey world, arched by a pale blue sky, marbled with grey cloud.

Millie's heart sank. She knew not why the beauty and glamour seemed all at once to have died out of her life, leaving it blank

and chill as it was before—perhaps before the Sunday tea-drinking at the Rectory. Nay, blanker and chillier for the lost glory.

"I think I should have been a beast if I had not," he replied, in the meantime, always with that unaccustomed gravity that woke a dark, dim fear in her heart.

"I spoke hotly," she faltered. "Perhaps I was rude."

"No, oh no! Perhaps I was rough."

"And I have been wanting to tell you how grateful I was for your good advice."

"Which?" he asked, in the old genial way. "I've given you tons of it; but your blood is on your own head, remember. Still, good advice is about the most indigestible stuff going."

"About the photography situation," she replied. "Of course I see, now that you have put it before me, that it would never have done for my father to have me in a photographer's shop *here*. Good for me, no doubt; I should have learnt the *hart*, as Blake said, thoroughly in his studio, and might have set up for myself later. Then

you would have let me take you in a shovel hat and gaiters, wouldn't you?"

"Say in a mitre and crosier, while you're about it."

"Yes; in a crosier and lawn sleeves! Oh! Mr. Burroughes!" Millie laughed at the vision of George thus attired. "But what *do* you think?" she added rapturously.

"Oh! a lot—an awful lot—of things I'd a precious deal rather not."

"It's almost settled," she replied; "indeed, it's as good as arranged that I'm to teach the little Morrison-Munns."

"But that will be a long walk for you every day, Miss Ray—three good miles."

"But Little Buckley is two and a half, and—well! it's pleasanter to be with gentlefolk; and summer is coming—no wet, or wind, or mud to speak of."

"You are very plucky," he said, slightly turning, and seeing the eager, flushed face through moist eyes, "and I—ah—wish you —every success. Lady Morrison-Munn is very nice. But Sir Munn—well! I mean, *she's*—you'll be sure to like *her*. Anything I can do? Do you know what I should

like to do?" he added with a sudden change of face, and in the low tones Millie had only heard addressed to herself.

"Something kind, no doubt," she replied. "You are always kind."

"I should like—oh! I should like——" He broke off with a faint gasp, and walked on in silence in the amethystine dusk, which was closing around them with a growing briskness in the air that presaged frost.

They were about to turn a corner of the dim, elm-shadowed high road, when a landau and pair dashed sharply round, so sharply that Millie's skirts were touched, and almost dragged by the wheels, and George, who had scarcely time to drop behind her and give her a gentle push towards the hedge, sang out fiercely to the coachman, who merely grinned and flicked his horses.

"Blackguard!" cried George savagely, on returning to her. "The day will come when I knock that fellow clean off his box. Beastly cads, to let their people drive like that!"

"We must write to the *Times*," Millie said. "A mercy it wasn't my Sunday gown."

Thus the conversation was turned, and the dangerously overcharged atmosphere cleared. Silence followed Millie's pregnant observation; but, though the air bit sharper and sharper with the deepening dusk, George walked more and more slowly, and they had nearly reached the row of cheap little houses away from the sea, in one of which the curate dwelt, before he, with hesitation and embarrassment, delivered into Millie's careful keeping a letter "of great importance," which she was straitly charged to deliver privately into her father's own hands, and to beg him to read at once, and in strict solitude.

She took it lightly, as a thing that did not concern her, and tucked it into her jacket pocket, with a happy blush hidden by the shadows, and then ensued another silence, throbbing with uncomprehended agitation, and broken at last by George, whose steps lagged more and more, until he stopped as if to say good-bye.

"You won't forget," he said slowly, "you *will* let me help you, won't you? Let me—" He paused and looked at the ground. "This

letter," he continued, "may part us. But, in any case, trust me, and let me be your friend."

"Oh! Mr. Burroughes, *let* you!"

"Millie," he cried, "Millie!" And then, without any farewell, he turned and vanished in the shadows.

CHAPTER VII.

MILLIE was already late; she dared delay no longer, but ran the few remaining steps to her own door, palpitating, breathless, thrilled with the echo of her own name in George's moved voice. She put the precious letter to her hot cheeks to cool them, but they only grew hotter and hotter; then, all on a sudden, she was inclined to burst out crying.

Opening the door, she stepped into the dimly-lighted, narrow entry, when her senses were assailed by the familiar odour of mineral oil-smoke and a singular sound, something between nocturnal caterwauling and a canine address to the full moon, sounds both eminently expressive of the tearfulness of things. An unusually prolonged and heart-piercing wail, such as proceeds from the depths of a sensitive feline breast at two in the morning, or thereabouts, toppled her suddenly from

purple heights of glowing romance to dead levels of greyest prose, and she became aware of Bella, who was seated on the lowest stair, with her apron over her head and the contents of a reversed coal-scuttle scattered profusely before her. The assembled family were carefully picking up the fragments with shovels and tongs, and taking advantage of intervals between heartrending wails to bid her be of good cheer and comfort herself with the reflection that it was not crockery or other fragile matter that was spilt.

"Do stop yowling, and pick up the coals, Bella," piped an impatient, but rational, boy's voice from the parlour, where Walter was vainly waiting for his tea.

At this the passage ceiling was almost rent by the outwailed agony of Bella's soul. Then Buffie, hitherto madly barking and joyously dragging at the roll of MS. sermon Mr. Ray had hastily stuffed into his pockets on seizing the dislocated tongs with which he was now delicately, but vainly, nipping at small lumps of coal, to the delight of Muffie, the kitten, who (considering the

show contrived solely for her amusement) danced daintily on her hind legs, disputing possession of the coals with the ineffectual tongs—Buffie, moved to sudden sympathy with Bella's sorrows, sat down on his tail, and, raising his chin in a straight line with his chest, uttered a howl of agony, which "shivered to the tingling stars," or would have done so, but for the upper storey and roof.

So that no one observed Millie's hot cheeks, shining eyes, and exalted look, or wondered why she gave Walter a hug that made him growl and wriggle and strike out with his small fists, muttering about "girls' silly stuff and molly-coddling," or why at the tea-table she fondled Muffie and made irrelevant contributions to the family conversation, and poured from the kettle to the teapot without the precaution of first removing the lid of the latter.

For, though Millie's slim young body adorned the family tea-table, her mind was with George Burroughes at the stile beneath the twisted thorn in the level sunshine. Of stiles she had always conceived as being con-

structed expressly for sweethearts to meet at and bend over—the man quite low, resting on his arms, and looking up earnestly at the maiden, who would be erect on the other side; or, perhaps, carelessly stayed against the top bar, her face always a little averted and expressive of a *debonair* indifference not incapable of changing. Trees usually shadowed those stiles, and honeysuckle and wild rose hedges, always in bloom, were there. Sometimes the sun glowed golden through the leaf-woven canopy, and sometimes that friend and patroness of young lovers, the moon, shot her silver shafts through the dewy leaves upon them. Millie liked the moonlit stiles best.

So to-night, while making toast at the fire for Walter, and staying her own hunger upon thick bread, daintily adorned with a roseate suggestion of jam, she heard the leisurely caw of homing rooks—sound redolent of fresh breezes, open downs, and wide-arched skies—the tinkle of sheep-bells, bleat of new-yeaned lambs, and sounds of human life and labour floating up from the valley, with the blackbird's good-night from

low copses, the shrill sweetness of little wrens in hedgerows, and, through all, George's deep, manly voice, modulating into a sweetness rarely heard.

She was breathing the fresh down air, salted by the near sea breath, the sweetness of trodden turf, the wholesome smell of earth fresh turned by the slow plough on the upland, where they had stopped a moment to see the shining slabs of mould curl along the edge of the share in the straight furrow, with cracking of whips, jingle of gear, shout and song of white-smocked ploughmen, and steady straining of beautiful silk-coated horses; saw the glamour and glory of sunset and sheen of the faintly murmuring sea, with its gleaming surf-fringe, and far, dream-like ships in the golden offing. She inhaled the sharpening breath of twilight and pungent odour of earth touched by hoarfrost, felt the charm of the first peeping star, "that bringeth all things," the lingering of George's steps, the enchanted silences, his vain efforts to put into words what his heart was overburdened with, and the final cry of "Millie, Millie;" but she forgot all about the close little schoolroom, with its

slates and copy-books, and was not aware that she was eating her third slice of bread and jam, or that her father had twice asked her for the news of the day.

"Only that Honeybun has at last confessed his innocence, papa. I mean—that is to say, it's proved that he didn't do it."

"But how can that be proved, my dear," her father asked in his mild way, "and who told you this?"

"Mr. Burroughes said that Honeybun is cleared. It is traced to another person."

"Dear me," said Mr. Ray, "dear me, what a pity!"

Then Millie remembered George's words, "I hope he will be sorry," and a nameless horror struck her. "Papa," she cried, turning pale, "a pity?"

"My dearest William," exclaimed Mrs. Ray. "A pity poor Honeybun is cleared?"

"Dear Edith, there is the really guilty person to be considered. Poor Honeybun is too well known as a dishonest person. Now, the poor creature who really did this thing, yielding perhaps to some piteous and uncontrollable temptation," said Mr. Ray,

looking through tear-dimmed eyes at Walter, whose cheeks were plumper than they had been, "may—who can tell?—hitherto have led an upright life. Honeybun is, I sadly fear, hardened by long indulgence in sin and distaste for holy things, though there is grace for him, as for all. But *this* poor sinner——" Mr. Ray paused, his lip quivered, his voice broke.

"Why, father," Walter cried, "you seem to know who it is. It must be a friend of yours."

"Are not all my parishioners my friends, Wattie?" replied Mr. Ray, absently stroking the soft brown head of Buffie, who sat begging, with one ear knowingly cocked, and a grin of complacent villainy on his queer little wrinkled black face.

"Let us earnestly trust that it is not a parishioner, or, if so, that it is at least a dissenter!" ejaculated Mrs. Ray, with pious fervour.

Far be it from us to ascribe bigotry or moral callousness to this gentle and kind-hearted lady. Yet it must be confessed that, what with her own sins and shortcomings,

the family troubles, the family mending and marketing, and the serious difficulty of keeping house and preserving what in her youth was termed a genteel appearance upon scarcely anything a year, together with her many sorrows and privations, she found her sympathies so much overcrowded as to leave but scant room to admit personal grief for iniquities committed outside of her family and her parish. She had, indeed, sometimes scarcely enough energy remaining at the end of the day's work to care whether Mr. Gladstone made mincemeat of the British Empire or not, and once openly observed, that she only hoped that he would not raise the price of provisions, particularly of tea and soap; to the immense scandal of Walter, whose politics and patriotism were of a pronounced dye. It was on that occasion that Mr. Ray, carefully wiping his glasses, had solemnly fetched a large Bible and read aloud from the beautiful Psalm of Patriotism, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee."

"And so I do, my dear," she meekly replied; though her conscience accused her

that on washing days and after a series of Dorcas meetings and blanket clubs, the intercessions in her private devotions did not extend beyond her family's needs. Unlike many wives whose Silver Wedding is past, Mrs. Ray still admired and appreciated her husband; yet she was, at times, tempted to muse whether she might not have been "earthlier happy" with a man who cared a little more for her temporal needs, and, without being less anxious for her soul's welfare, was a little less apt in publicly discovering Biblical passages that exactly applied to her private sins and shortcomings. But these feelings arose, she well knew, from her unworthiness and carnal-mindedness.

It seemed to Millie that evening that she would never find the necessary opportunity of privately delivering the precious, fateful note to her father. "It may part us," George Burroughes said. How little he guessed what was in her heart! This modesty of true love, in one in every way so superior to her, was most captivating. Such diffidence was surely very rare, the poor child mused, pressing the sacred envelope to her innocent

heart, while she watched her opportunity. She found it at last in the kitchen, where Mr. Ray had passed an hour in preparing Bella for confirmation.

It was easy to despatch Bella on some errand and detain Mr. Ray a moment by the kitchen fire. He looked tired and worn; the thin hands he spread to the fire trembled in a way that went to his child's heart. It struck her that an hour spent in trying to open up some passage to that yet undiscovered bourn, Bella's intellect, might be fatiguing; her heart bounded at the thought of the unexpected and lasting pleasure this letter of George's would give him.

"Wait a bit, papa," she said, recklessly stirring the fire to a wasteful, voluptuous blaze, "here is a letter for you from Mr. Burroughes. He asked me to give it privately into your hands."

"Oho!" returned her father, smiling with arch and gentle pleasantry, as he saw the colour rush into her face. "Mr. Burroughes, Millie? It strikes me that we hear a good deal of Mr. Burroughes, in these days. I must inquire into this. Pray, my dear, how

did Mr. Burroughes come to entrust notes to your hand, rather than to that of an ordinary messenger?"

"He—ah—he met me, papa," faltered Millie, in blissful confusion.

"Where, Millie? We heard nothing of any meeting, when the news of the day was discussed at tea, I think."

"On the down near Little Buckley," confessed the guilty Millie, in a low voice, happy tears clouding her downcast eyes.

"For the first time?"

"No," in a very, very faint voice.

"My dear, have you told your mother?"

"Y—yes, that is, I mean, she knew. I haven't told her to-night, though—at least, not yet."

"Don't cry, Millie, don't cry. Always tell your mother everything, my dear, everything. You have always been a good girl, and a great comfort to us. You only need true conversion, Millie, and that I continually pray for and know will come. God bless you, my dear child!"

Millie threw her arms round his neck, kissed him, and fled. Mr. Ray remained

with the letter in his hand, turning it this way and that, and looking, with a pleased, gentle smile on his face, at the dancing flames in the kitchen grate.

"Burroughes is very lovable," he mused; "many gifts are his. He is genial, honest, pleasant, and manly. He does not preach conversion, it is true; nor has he any real conviction of sin. Who knows but he may have been unconsciously converted? Of the elect, without being yet aware of it? A beautiful character, that will doubtless grow in grace. *Fiat voluntas tuas!* William Ray, William Ray, how great are the blessings with which your cup is brimming! You who murmured, you who deemed the loving discipline of your Heavenly Father over severe! Fie on you! Where was your faith? Is He not always present in the storm, though sleeping; perchance, in the hinder part of the vessel? Oh, thou of little faith; wherefore didst thou doubt, wherefore didst thou doubt?"

He bowed his head and covered his face with his thin hands; the light of the leaping blaze played over the scant, long grey hair,

and a hidden cricket chirped a merry refrain through a few seconds. Then Mr. Ray lifted a face alight with serene radiance, and, drawing the benzoline lamp to the edge of the deal table, broke the seal—a large red one, stamped with the Burroughes arms—and drew out and unfolded the letter in the double light of fire and lamp. A peculiar, faint, crisp crackle directed his attention to a tiny pin fastening to the thick note-paper three thin, silvery, water-marked sheets, on each of which his astonished eyes read the Bank of England's mandate to pay the bearer ten pounds. Was it going to rain bank-notes, or was he dreaming?

The first pungent sense of pleasure at sight of these gave way to pain and bewilderment; nothing was owing to him, and this was scarcely an occasion on which to raise his salary; how could Burroughes do anything so coarse and ungraceful? It was not like him. He looked sorrowfully at the fire a minute and then turned to the letter, which was as follows, in the clear, bold, rather small handwriting with which he was now familiar :—

FRESHFORD RECTORY,
Feb. 28.

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR,—It is with the deepest regret that I write to inform you that one of the missing notes has been traced. It was presented for payment at the Imperial and Agricultural Bank at Wilchester, on the day following its disappearance, by a person well known to the cashier. Unless that person can at once satisfactorily account for his possession of the note, he will be arrested on the charge of stealing it. I am bound to prosecute. The utmost I can do is to defer the arrest for twenty-four hours at the latest. During that period the guilty person may escape. He would of course try to reach Spain. I earnestly hope he may do so, and thus avoid a terrible scandal, as well as avert grave trouble from his unfortunate and innocent family.

I am,

Reverend and dear Sir,

Very truly yours,

GEORGE BURROUGHES.

P.S.—I have arranged to take both wedding and funeral to-morrow.

Mr. Ray read the letter twice, and then sat staring stupidly before him, with his head bent forward and his chin sunk on his breast. Millie's reckless and extravagant blaze had burnt itself down to a dry crackle in the small pinched-up range, the cricket chirped

merrily on, his song challenging comparison with

"The grasshopper's among some grassy hills,"

to the listener, half lost in drowsiness by the fire.

Steps were then heard approaching, and Mrs. Ray came into the kitchen on some household errand, closely followed by Bella. Mr. Ray thrust the letter into his pocket and rose, gazing abstractedly about him, like one in a dream. His presence in the sacred apartment consecrated to those tyrannous domestic gods, the servants of middle-class households, was not unusual; his wife scarcely observed that he was there, or that he went out when she and Bella came in.

He wandered slowly into the parlour, where he found Walter alone and busy with his Virgil; he heard the sound of the piano from the cold room in which Millie was conscientiously practising with freezing fingers and a heart warm with youth's deepest, dearest glow, and his lips quivered. He looked at Walter, who was too much absorbed to observe his entrance, and took his

usual place at the dining-table, where his desk and books were arranged for him with affectionate care, and, shading his face with his hand in a way habitual to him, seemed lost in profound study.

Presently Walter looked up, and seeing the familiar bent figure sitting there, asked a question concerning the unfortunate Queen of Carthage, and was duly enlightened. Buffie, lying flat on his back, with all his legs in the air, snarled faintly at a dream-foe; and the kitten, Muffie, stretched at length on her side, like a small dead tiger, extended her legs to their utmost limit, and then comfortably expanded her claws, and curled them cosily up again, as if firmly grasping solid bliss.

Millie practised her hour out, and then waited, expecting her father; but he did not come. The night had turned very cold, the wind roared; she heard the thunder of surf on the distant shore; her fingers ached with the pinching frost, but her cheeks kept their soft glow.

"The letter may part us," some mocking spirit echoed in her burning ears, as she packed away the music and entered the dim,

silent parlour, with its three familiar figures clustered about the lamp. No one looked up at her quiet entrance, and the evening wore itself out as usual until the supper-hour came. Then Mr. Ray went out of the room, and returned with hat, gloves, comforter, and overcoat.

"I am going to that poor Perkins, my dear," he said, beginning to put on his overcoat by the fire; "he will probably pass away this night. No, Edith, I will not stop for our bread and cheese, thank you. I will take some in my pocket to consume during the night."

Here he was interrupted by exclamations of horror and dismay. Surely he could not contemplate sitting up all night with the dying man? &c.

"But, my dears," he replied in his gentle voice, "what do you suppose clergymen are made for, if not to pilot sin-burdened souls through the dark valley? Who knows but this poor man may, at the last moment, repent, if the Cross is faithfully held before him? Does Caroline remonstrate with *her* husband when he visits patients in the night,

and that only for the sake of the poor perishing body? You will conduct family prayer in my absence, dear Edith; and, not to disturb people, I will remain till morning, in any case. I may be able to console the poor mourners. Oh, I will take care of myself, trust me. As the night is sharp, I will take a glass of Walter's port—luxurious fellow, with his port wine and beef tea and hot suppers! He is becoming a perfect alderman. Look at his fat cheeks; look at them," repeated Mr. Ray, gently pinching the lad's ear, as he sipped the unaccustomed luxury. "We shall have Wattie rowing in the University Eight by-and-by; eh, mother? God bless you all, my dears. Good-night. Good-night."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN the street-door closed upon her father, and she heard his steps dying away in the distance on the frosty road, Millie's heart dropped like a stone in her breast. He might, oh! he might have spared one moment to tell her of the fateful letter, which "may part us." What were pangs of dying in comparison with the anguish of a young, living, loving heart, torn by such suspense of hope and fear as hers? What deadly secret was in the letter that she had so cherished for the sake of the strong, kind hand that wrote it? Her pillow was very wet that night and the soft, brown eyes were clouded with tears and the strong, impetuous, unbearable anguish of passionate, unreasoning youth. She fell asleep at last and dreamed the sweet afternoon and tender gloaming, echoing with the cry of "Millie,

Millie!" over again, and woke, as the young wake, to renewed hope.

But breakfast passed with no message from her father. A vague uneasiness brooded on the small household. Mrs. Ray scarcely touched the frugal fare before her, but kept rising and looking from the window, to watch for her husband's approach, his absence from breakfast being almost without precedent. Millie lingered till her mother scolded her and bustled her off with just ten minutes in which to walk the long two miles. She deviated from her usual route to pass Perkins's cottage, in the hope of meeting her father, and saw by the blinds in the windows that the sick man still lived. Then she had to go at a furious pace to be in time, and finally reached Little Buckley, breathless, late, and with a wounded heart.

George Burroughes was just then walking into the church to marry the waiting couple. Having done this, he lingered in the vestry, doing nothing, but, as the sexton subsequently observed, fidgetting. Then he went home, took off his coat and waistcoat, and dug a large piece of potato ground, the

surface of which was frozen hard. His cousin, Maud, who had been away and had just returned to finish the long visit begun some weeks before, came out at one o'clock to bid him to luncheon; but he refused, had a glass of ale and some bread and cheese sent out to him, and dug on till it was time for the funeral, which he duly performed.

On returning home from the funeral, he called at Mr. Ray's, where Bella informed him that her master was asleep on his bed, and was not to be disturbed, having been up all night.

"Why, George," said his mother, meeting him in the garden, "what is it? Not taken?"

"No, worse—the worst. Gone to Spain. Not a line or a word. The money not returned. Up all night! Sleeping it off! One sees through it all. What on earth could Ray be up all night for?"

"My *dear* George! Those poor Rays! I *am* grieved. Should I go to her, do you think?"

"Not yet; not till to-morrow at least. One *may* be mistaken even now. There's

just the ghost of a chance. No letter, I suppose?"

"Nothing. Where is the inspector?"

"On the watch. The earths are all stopped. Oh, mother!" He turned and rushed into the kitchen garden, where the earth was now hardening with increasing frost, took a pickaxe to break up the ground with, and went to work in good style for a couple of hours without stopping.

From the savage and determined way in which he hewed at the frozen bosom of patient mother earth, it might have been the devil and all his works, instead of the source of human nourishment. Click, click, click, went the pickaxe on the frost-bound earth, until several rows of cubes, two feet long and a foot and a half deep, were turned up to receive the action of the frost, to the great joy of some robins and thrushes, hopping in his traces, and satisfaction of the gardener, who was leisurely giving his mind to the growth of things, with the aid of a pipe in his mouth.

"As good as a load of manure, let alone clearing the ground," thought this worthy

man, sitting comfortably on the handles of his wheelbarrow and observing the rector's mighty strokes from a distance.

The sky was a chill steel grey, and the wild North-Easter, so fervently invoked the day before, bit keener and keener as the hours passed, making leafless branches clatter and laurel and bay trees rattle their stiff leaves together. George had picked up a pretty piece of ground, and was stopping to look at it and wipe his hot forehead, with a sort of surly satisfaction, when the tap of a light footstep, mingling with the patter of leaves on the path sheltered by the laurel hedge, was heard, and Maud Ascott, cosily wrapped in furs, and with a face glowing from the North-Easter's rough salute, appeared, carrying a large cup of tea.

"Cat-lap!" growled the ungracious recipient, on hearing that his mother had sent it out with earnest requests for its reception. "I verily believe that women think a cup of tea a consolation for every earthly ill. Whether banks smash, or human limbs or hearts, whether relations die or cut one off with a shilling, whether one is fried alive in

August or frozen to death in December, it's all the same.

"'It cheers but not inebriates,' as Mr. Swinburne so beautifully observes," replied his cousin. "Come, George, cheer up! 'Take the cup and drink it up, and call the neighbours in.' I am firmly convinced that things will be cleared up, and everybody live happy ever after."

"Never. He would have returned the three ten-pound notes, at least, before this. It's a case of fly by night, Maud."

"Not at all. I believe in your curate, George. It was a case of love at first sight. This ship flies the curate's colours through thick and thin, remember."

"Then this ship will soon have to haul her colours down."

"Not a bit of it. They're nailed to the mast. The dear old man has a sneaking kindness for me too, and I know he secretly admires me, because he tried to convert me the very first day he saw me. He rebuked my vanity. Now, my clerical relations have never rebuked my vanity or tried to convert me."

"You are a brick, Maud, and a thorough-paced one," he replied, with irrelevant fervour and reckless metaphor. "The tea isn't bad, after all. You always stick to a fellow when he's down on his luck. But it's no go about poor old Ray. My best hope is that trouble has turned his brain and he believes in all this sickening cant about answered prayer. But old port straight from heaven, with the year of vintage obligingly mentioned! That's too much."

"Now, I'll tell you three things, George, if you'll put on your coat, and behave like a respectable parson of a parish. Firstly: Mr. Ray has relations dependent on him —which accounts for his extreme poverty. Secondly: I know where the old port came from, and he doesn't, and poor little Millie cut up her only fur to make Walter's coat and paid for the cloth and tailoring, and Dr. Browne knows a thing or two, and—and—I believe Mr. Ray is as simple-minded as—as—St. Francis of Assisi."

"I could fall at your feet for this," gasped George, turning away, with two great tears hopping over his face, "but—but—how

account for the running away with the ten-pound notes?"

"Why, you tiresome fellow," returned his cousin in a rather uncertain voice, and with marvellous softness in her large, pansy-like eyes, "you won't listen to the third thing. Mr. Ray sat up all last night with that poor Perkins, who died at noon to-day. He never left the house till nearly two this afternoon, when he was quite knocked up. George, he may never have read your letter. He may be able to account for possession of the stolen note after all."

"Heaven bless you, Maud," ejaculated her cousin, stealthily flicking the last of the big tears away with his finger. "Are you *sure* of these things, you angel?"

"Is thy servant nine dead donkies? Geordie, the thief may have given Mr. Ray the note in return for cash."

"Good Lord!" cried George, "it's just possible. Maud, you should have told me this at first."

> "Alas! the gratitude of man
> Has oftener left me mourning,"

said Maud, half laughing and half crying to

herself, when George, having unceremoniously put the large breakfast-cup into her hands, rushed off without a word or even a look. "Oh, George, were you ten thousand bishops or a quarter of a million hussars, you would still be a man—a real live, good-hearted, lovable, aggravating *man!*"

When she reached the house, she looked into a mirror in the hall and found that the wind had put no more colour into her face than was becoming, and had ruffled her fluff of short hair most enchantingly with tiny rings up-curled over the velvet and fur of the toque she wore, and that her dark, hearts-ease eyes seemed darker and more velvety than ever in the bright face, becomingly set in rich furs. "But," she reflected, turning away, "what does *he* care? If I'd gone out wrapped in a hearthrug, with a stew-pan upon my head, *he'd* never have noticed it, the *wretch!* Poor old George! It will break his heart."

Mr. Ray had just risen, still sleepy, with cold chills running down his back, and his bones feeling as if they had all been taken to pieces and wrongly put together again by

an idle and inexpert workman; for he was unaccustomed to the dissipation of sitting up all night, which requires a good deal of practice and many luxurious compensations to make it perfectly enjoyable. "A cup of tea will set me quite right, my dear," he replied, with his usual rebuke to his Martha for her over carefulness and trouble. "After all, what is one vigil? One ought to be ashamed of taking an afternoon's sleep to make up. But, somehow, one is not as young as one was, and, my dear, I fear the Marthas are not confined to the weaker sex, I do fear it."

Mr. Ray chuckled gently to himself over his little joke, and spread his hands before the fire, cheered by the lively song of the kettle and the leaping lustre on the bare walls in the gathering dusk; but cheered most by the sight of Walter, who was rapidly putting on flesh and gaining colour and strength from his generous diet and open-air excursions, and bid fair, the doctor reported, to grow out of his weakness altogether, though with one leg shortened, at this rate. Mr. Ray felt himself entitled to a little holiday

after his strenuous night's work, followed, as it had been, by the best part of the day spent in mental and emotional exertion in most painful scenes, and he took it in the pleasant fire-lit dusk while the homely meal was being prepared, by feasting his eyes and thoughts on his only beloved son.

Walter, but for the infirmity which crippled him, was a handsome well-formed boy; his face, refined, but no longer pinched, by suffering, was beautiful, his splendid dark eyes were full of intellect and imagination, the pure flute-voice of his boyhood was just beginning to break a little with adolescence, but was still, on the whole, clear and round with the unearthly, evanescent sweetness of a boy treble. He was now reading, at his father's desire, some Latin verses, unusually good, the father thought, renderings of the modern English poet he had just learnt to love; his face was turned towards the firelight, and caught the red glow on the broad, white brow, about which clung and clustered dark, tendrilled hair.

"Of old sat Freedom on the heights,
The thunders breaking at her feet,"

the voice rolled out in Latin iambics, and Mr. Ray's tired blue eyes kindled, shedding light upon the lad; his heart expanded, his imagination soared. He saw Walter, a healthy and handsome, though fragile man, rising, by the nobility of intellect and character, above his fellows, a star in the ministry perhaps, or at the Bar, or it was even possible, he might be another and a sweeter Milton. Good, scholarly foundations had been laid by the father's own hands; just a little more bodily strength and the boy might win scholarships and exhibitions, and, going to either University, take honours, and—and——

So the old man dreamed and dreamed of the son who had been given him so late in life and with such precarious tenure of it; the boy whose feeble wail had been stilled through long, cold nights of waking and walking up and down, in his own arms; whose childhood had been snatched again and again from the jaws of the grave; whom they had been warned again and again they would scarcely, with the greatest care, bring up to man's estate; a child difficult to train morally be-

cause of physical weakness; a child truly of many prayers.

"Millie late again?" said the subject of these dreams, having finished and been commended for his verses; "that's old Burroughes' doing, I'll bet. He's always after her now, that's why she's getting out of her dowdy ways. Girls always do when they have sweethearts."

Mr. Ray's face clouded, the pleasant dreams vanished; grey hard fact confronted him. "My poor Millie," he said to himself, recalling the scene by the kitchen fire and the unexpected contents of the mysterious letter.

At the moment Millie was, in fact, coming so quickly round the corner in the dusk that she nearly rushed into George Burroughes' expectant arms.

"Miss Ray," he said at once, without any preamble, "did you give your father that letter last night?"

"Certainly, Mr. Burroughes," she replied coldly.

"Into his own hands? Are you *sure* that he read it—quite, quite sure?"

Sweet hope stole into Millie's breast, gleamed a moment, and faded.

"I gave the letter, as you desired, into my father's own hands, when we were alone together, last night. I gave him your message, to read it alone, and left him. I know nothing more. I have not seen him alone since. Won't you come in and see my father, and deliver your own message, Mr. Burroughes? He is probably at home."

"I can't," replied George, "I can't face it. But I—I—I'll be at hand—and—if I can do anything, pray let me. You know—oh! you *know* that I would do anything to be of the smallest use or comfort to you."

He turned and left her, more bewildered than ever, at her own door, near which a tall man in dark blue saluted her as he passed.

"Good evening, Inspector," she said, with cheerful, if constrained, affability. "More misdoings, I'm afraid. Who's wanted this time? Tramps or naughty boys? Hen-coops robbed, or gardens?"

"Neither," replied the inspector, with an embarrassed air. "A cold evening, miss."

"Bitter. I suppose you can't come in and warm yourself?"

"Not at present, thank you. On duty, miss."

So Millie went in, half ashamed to meet her father after last night's scene in the kitchen, and talked fast, to give herself an air of easy insouciance, hearing the family news and relating her day's adventures and her meeting with Inspector Wilkins. "I shouldn't like to be a policeman," she added, "I'm afraid I should let all the people go, instead of taking them up to encourage the others."

Just then, through a peal of Walter's facile laughter at the notion of Millie in the police force, the front-door bell rang, and there was sudden silence in the fire-lit parlour. Every one recognised something sinister in the familiar tinkle; Millie's heart stood still; it was as if she had long been listening for that every-day sound, mysteriously laden, it seemed, with imminent doom. Buffie conscientiously barked, but not with his wonted energy; he laboured under the delusion that it was his bounden duty to call attention to every ring at the door by a series of ear-

rending yowls—but even he felt vaguely uneasy at that bell-ringing, which had something stealthy and suppressed in its sound, as if ashamed of itself. It was quickly followed by the appearance of Bella, smutched as usual with soot, but this time on the forehead, and with her accustomed distraught visage and awestruck, hoarse whisper.

"If you please, sir, it's only Mr. Barton"—caretaker and attendant at the Parish Room adjacent—"and will Mr. Ray be so kind as step over the perishing room for a minute, because Mr. Wilkins, he ses, he ain't agoing to kick his heels out in the cold no longer," she announced, with her habitual knack of supplying detail—usually irrelevant—to her messages.

Mr. Ray, cosily sipping his fifth cup of tea and beginning to feel on better terms with his own bones, at once rose, wondering at the unaccustomed summons, and hastened out, forgetting even his hat, which Millie dutifully seized and pursued him with. The sight of his thin grey hair streaming in the bitter North-Easter, and only faintly seen in the lamplight and the last of the dusk,

went to her heart, and the slight uncertainty of his hasty steps impressed her. "He is growing old," she thought sadly.

Until now her father's age had scarcely been a matter of speculation. To childhood parents are old, like all grown-up people; with adolescence they grow younger, till they go back to middle age, that is, about forty, at which age they remain for years, until a day comes when the filial heart feels, with a sudden pang, that they are growing old and need care.

She did not see Inspector Wilkins on one side of her father and another man in blue at the other side, while a third followed at a short distance behind, as she turned and ran in out of the freezing wind.

Nor did Mr. Ray. He hurried to the Parish Room a few yards distant, wondering if there was anything the matter with the gas, or some mistake about Bible Classes, and stepped into the empty hall, dimly lighted by a couple of gas jets, which showed him George Burroughes' face, of a deathly hue and singular expression.

George did not speak, he scarcely knew

why he was there, unless it were with some last lingering hope of explanation. He looked at Mr. Ray, strangely; Mr. Ray looked at him, fearfully, with a clear conviction that an evil hour had struck for him. While they were thus silently gazing, the policemen, hesitating no longer, though they had shrunk from their task to the utmost limit of delay, closed round Mr. Ray and arrested him on the charge of stealing certain bank-notes on a certain day.

Mr. Ray staggered and turned white. "*Those* notes," he said at last, trembling like a leaf, and speaking in a hoarse, faint voice; "I—steal—*those* notes!"

They showed him the warrant, repeated the values and numbers of the notes, bid him be careful, as what he said would be used as evidence against him, when they were interrupted by a cry of exceeding anguish.

"My sin," he shrieked, "my sin has found me out. It was for Walter! Oh! my God, it was for my stricken child! My sin, my sin!"

George, shuddering, covered his face at

the cry. The dull sound of a falling body made him look up to see the poor curate drop in a heap on the bare, boarded floor.

Some one else saw this distressing sight, some one who had entered softly and unperceived, in time to hear the constable's caution and the terrible cry it evoked. She had thrown a shawl over her head and hastened after her husband on an impulse she could not resist, with a sure presentiment that something had gone wrong. George saw the horror in her stony eyes and grey face, the mute agony in her pale and rigid mouth: it haunted him for weeks.

CHAPTER IX.

THERE is a process known as hushing up—one of the most disastrous, probably, ever devised by mortal man; for it is in the essence of a really good scandal that the more it is hushed up, the more powerfully does it bruit itself about, buzzing here and hissing there, in acrid, inaccurate whispers that penetrate where clear-toned truth could never pierce and find hearing.

Old port was one of the whispers concerning Mr. Ray that hissed most virulently through Freshford, buzzing about shops and cottage doors, round tea-pots of various moulds — from the black earthenware of Grannie Jones, the Britannia metal and porcelain of more comfortable folk, to the pretentious electro-plate, the unpretending solid silver of the Victorian era, plain and chased, and choice varieties of antique, Georgian, and even Queen Anne—old port was

the word, the venomous sibilation of which gave zest to numerous decoctions of the most soothing leaf grown on mortal tree, brewed in these various vessels and sipped by mortals of various degree. Who could have thought that old port had power over such a soul? That a temptation so banal, so limited, was yet mighty to hurl one from such high summits to the trodden and desecrating dust?

Nor did the raucous whisper circle about the genial odours of the harmless tea-board only; it hissed among fragrant clouds from another and more pernicious weed, loved of the male portion of mankind, and amid fumes of more powerful and inspiring beverages than that borrowed from the Asian celestials. It floated through mists arising from the homely, but indispensable wash-tub, and those emanating from the yet more necessary saucepan; it circled round dinner-tables *à la mode*, and those *à la bourgeoisie Britannique;* it became a sneer and a chuckle in sumptuous Woolfordian dining-rooms, and a sigh through groups of ladies, in their after-dinner moments in drawing-

rooms, which their male belongings beguiled in prized seclusion from ears feminine.

Its primary source was the neighbour who nursed that Perkins, whose death-bed Mr. Ray so assiduously watched; this woman averred that she knew by unmistakable symptoms that the poor curate had been drinking port wine before taking his station at the death-bed. The parish-clerk had perceived it more than once by the same token in the vestry; parishioners, spying through the window of the dingy parlour by daylight, had seen the curate recklessly drinking wine with his son. Truly there is no smoke without fire, but a very poor little fire is sometimes responsible for an amazing quantity of smoke.

Freshford folk knew now how to account for the sudden eloquence of a hesitating, prosy preacher. Also for trembling hands and sudden accesses of indisposition and occasional tottering gait. "Very sad," people said, not without a certain unctuous satisfaction. "Very sad! In such a position! Who could have thought it?" &c.

These things were hinted even to George

Burroughes, whose indignation at the aspersion was the more tempestuous, because of the deadly echo the thing found in his inmost sickened heart. He had never supposed that affairs would have come to an actual arrest, else he would have acted differently. His letter gave fullest warning and amplest means of avoiding any such extremity. To the last moment, the very last moment, when he saw the unfortunate man fall with those agonised words of self-condemnation, George had hoped, rather than expected, some satisfying explanation of black-looking circumstances. But that cry, wrung from the conscience-stricken man, shattered his hopes, broke his trust in human perfectibility, and even shook his faith; it was as the knell of a whole ruined world to him. And, though he never intended to prosecute, he had thought it well, in the dreaded case of actual guilt, to give a sound and wholesome fright and also to convey the culprit to a safe distance, both from parish and family, who would all, in every way, be benefited by his removal.

But now that regret was too late, he deeply

regretted this course of action, and imagined many better ways out of the difficulty, judging by results.

But the scandal could not be entirely hushed up at this late moment. Mrs. Ray's ashen face and stony glance cut accusingly to the quick of his heart, and he felt that the old man's quivering mouth and agonised cry would haunt him till his dying day.

Mr. Ray's house was searched. A twenty-pound note was found, hidden in a spring drawer in the poor curate's own private desk, and easily identified as one of the missing notes by its number.

Mrs. Ray was present at this finding, and, to George's grief, she betrayed no surprise —perhaps the stony horror on her rigid face was too great to be increased, and could not be surpassed. She raised no objection to the search, not even asking to see the warrant for it, but looked on as at some expected inevitable event; so she might have looked on had the world been falling to pieces. She did not appear surprised even during the inspection of the old-fashioned walnut bureau, with its slanting desk top

that let down and disclosed writing conveniences, when, in the bottom drawer, always unlocked and the acknowledged public receptacle for all manner of odds and ends—knots of twine thriftily taken from parcels and hoarded for use, corks, wrapping paper, odd magazines, buttons, tin-tacks, circulars made and to be made into spills, card-board boxes, broken bits of china and wood-work, a few old children's toys, scraps of cloth and list for gardening, packets of seeds, ends of window cord, and disabled back-broken books—a morocco letter-case, bearing the initials G.R.B., was discovered alongside of an old sermon-case of Mr. Ray's, similarly marked with other initials. Some letters still remained in the case, together with the rector's long-lost, half-written sermon and a receipted bill. Another letter, beginning "Dear George," was found in another part of this drawer. The letter-case was in the outer part of the drawer at the bottom, buried beneath an old card-board almanac, and a good-sized portfolio containing drawings in poor Walter's "early manner."

There was a careful carelessness about the disposal of these things that finally clinched the obvious argument as to how they came there, and put all doubt, as well as hope, from George's mind.

After that first conscience-stricken cry, Mr. Ray said nothing. With returning consciousness he looked with dumb anguish into the face bending over him, and read his condemnation in his wife's unfamiliar gaze and rigid lips. Never before had such looks passed between these two, never had they imagined it possible to exchange glances so terrible. The poor, stricken wife had loosened her husband's collar and rendered him all necessary services to recall him to consciousness after his fainting; but she said nothing, and he missed the accustomed tenderness of her touch, a lack of which she was probably unaware; and something seemed to give way within his heart and vanish. After that one dreadful exchange of glances, he turned his head away and closed his eyes again, like one smitten by mortal anguish who would fain look no more upon the woful world.

George thought he had fainted again,

and was for giving him more stimulant; but Mrs. Ray knew better, and silently put away the offered glass he had hastily procured with some of the sensations he supposed peculiar to murderers, at the sight of the agonised droop of that grey and once honoured head.

But Mr. Ray soon unclosed his grieved eyes again, and looked about him as one dazed by excess of misery, assenting to the suggestion that he had recovered by a sign of the head. When again asked if he had anything to say, and again cautioned as to the result of saying it, he replied in the same dumb fashion. George could not meet that helpless, hurt gaze; it reminded him of the mute amazed reproach in the eyes of a suffering dumb animal; nor could he bear the air of utter hopeless bewilderment with which the old man went through the subsequent scenes. He seemed to be stunned and stupefied by his trouble. The only circumstance that witnessed to his comprehension of what had befallen him, was his silently taking from his pocket and handing to George his own letter of the evening before, containing the three ten-pound notes.

George's first action on Mr. Ray's arrest —to him unexpected, since he had sent for him to the Parish Room to explain and receive explanations in the matter of the traced note, and supposed that the constables would delay the apprehension till that was over— was to try to quash the proceedings at once. But this could not so easily be done. The affair was no longer in his hands, but in those of the police. Not only was the warrant for his apprehension issued, and the note traced, but the man was actually in custody. The prosecution could not be withdrawn, even though he should refuse to prosecute, except at the discretion of magistrates.

"I wish to goodness Woolford had never given me those accursed notes," groaned George next day, with singular injustice and want of logic, "then it would never have happened. You were right, Maud, in blaming me for taking unholy money for Church purposes."

"Come, George, the money wasn't unholy, and I was only taking poor Lord Woolford at your valuation, which was not quite fair."

"Well, no; it wasn't, after all. I don't

suppose he is worse than others, but one must blame somebody in misery like this. For pity's sake don't deprive me of that poor comfort. Think of the solace it would be to be able to knock somebody down!"

"My good George, that would be better than slandering beneficent marquises behind their backs. What a pity the devil has gone out of fashion! People used to blame him when things went wrong, though I don't think that was quite fair either."

"To blame whom, my dear?" asked innocent Mrs. Burroughes, whose second handkerchief was now wet with grief and sympathy.

"Oh, the devil!" replied George, with an absent-minded impatience that startled his poor mother into false conclusions.

"Flippancy was never more inappropriate than in this case, Maud," he added; "the fact is, it was my fault. I ought to have raised his stipend. I might have known. It is not right to tempt people by exposing them to such poverty. Oh, but *that* man——"

"It will all come right," Maud broke in,

with an air of cheerful finality. "My colours are still flying. Of course you can't prosecute, but don't try to hush it up. In the first place, you can't."

"But, Maud, the scandal to the Church," pleaded Mrs. Burroughes.

"The Church," replied George, "is above scandal. She can amply vindicate her own honour. But the man—oh, the man! and his—his family!" Here was a catch in his breath, and some strong feeling that made him rise from the chair in which he was extended in an attitude peculiar to masculine misery, with legs stretched full length before him, chin on breast, bent back, and pocketed hands, and pace the sunny library, in which they were holding family conclave. "It is too much."

"Precisely," said his cousin, whose large, dilating, pansy eyes were darker and more velvety than ever to-day. "For the sake of the man and his innocent family the matter ought to be cleared up, fully investigated. If I were in his position I should *demand* a public examination."

"You *do* stand by a fellow," George replied

wistfully. "But that won't clear him, unluckily. Nothing can destroy fact—not even faith, which removes mountains."

"I am sure we would all give half we possess, if we could," added his mother.

"We need give nothing," returned Maud, in her spirited way. "Surely you both *know* that Mr. Ray could not do such a thing. You are rather shaky on miracles, Geordie, yet such a deed on his part would be a miracle of the first water. Now, will you have the goodness to tell me why he did not take advantage of your letter of warning? Oh, call him mad or desperate, if you like, but, believe me, no man capable of the outrageous action of picking a guest's pocket would have missed that chance."

"Oh, but you forget—you forget the main, the piteous temptation, the poor boy!" he returned, with half a sob; "he wouldn't leave the boy."

The velvety eyes clouded, the nimble tongue hesitated for once. "Ah, don't think that, dear George. I tell you he *didn't do* it. Oh, it will all come out presently. You may stake your pile on that," she added in her

light, laughing way, and with a voice that made the borrowed slang almost a charm.

"Well," returned George, looking at his watch, "I'll go straight to Morrison-Munn now, and see what pressure I can put upon *him*. As for Leveson, I fear he's no go. Somehow poor old Ray has contrived to set all these fellows' backs up, and they all hang together, Woolford and all."

"Yes," sighed Mrs. Burroughes, when her son was gone, "poor Mr. Ray *is* unpopular. There is certainly something wrong about him. I felt that from the first."

"He is unpopular with that set, Aunt Carrie, because he makes them conscious of their own moral inferiority. And you, and I, and George hate to hear sermons about Scarlet Women, sudden conversions, and Sabbath breaking. Do you think Elijah was popular with the Justice Shallows of his time?"

"Really, my dear child——"

The dear child had vanished with her last fiery question, leaving her aunt to ponder upon the singular out-spokenness and lack of reverence displayed by the

newly-risen female generation, and the black abysses of ruin that probably awaited them in consequence.

"Poor dear George!" said the dear child to herself, after a few seconds passed in the shadow of her handkerchief, "as if I couldn't see churches by daylight! No doubt he respected Mr. Ray's character. Who could do otherwise—but—but—oh! I know where the sting lies. He's so very human. Oh, George, George, you have your revenge now, if you only knew it! Oh, yes. I led you on, I played with you, tormented you, made fun of you, laughed at your sufferings—tiresome, downright, blundering old George! It's singular, when one comes to think of it. Perhaps one has a weakness for one's own property, or one gets to like people by dint of tormenting them. But George Burroughes, of all men! And I so sure of myself, so free of weakness. Well, I'm paid out now, and no mistake!"

George refused to offer evidence in the matter of the lost notes. He privately represented the impropriety of publishing an old man's weakness, and bringing scandal upon

the Church; he urged the probability of some mental aberration, temporary or otherwise—but he urged in vain.

Mr. Ray's previous unpopularity had been intensified by his retention in his charge against the wishes of the Woolfordian faction—that lordly and luxurious set, who felt themselves entitled, by some divine right, to the best, the modish best, of everything, including parsons, and who could not even say their prayers without some caressing of senses, some flattering of cultivated tastes, substituting music and flowers, comely ritual and tasteful expression of the misery of sinners, for those cosy little parlours, cushioned and curtained off from inferior sinners, and warmed by special little grates, in which their forebears confessed their iniquities. This set were scandalised at being put off with a curate so far behind the times, who spoilt the intoning, used the wrong shibboleth, preached old-fashioned proses, simply did not exist as a social unit, and considered Woolfordian sins and country-gentlemen iniquities of no more moment than the transgressions of farmers, shopkeepers, and day-labourers. For is it in any

degree fit or natural that people whose daily bread is decorated, and whose daily living is sumptuous, should put up with inferior and unpleasing adjuncts to public worship?

These worthy folk had often maintained that Mr. Ray would do very well for a remote country village, but was really not good and advanced enough for a large parish like Freshford, containing so many "good"—indeed, "best"—people. It was bad enough that their spiritual palates were displeased, and their souls uncomforted, by the ministrations of this rejected and ineffectual curate, but great, indeed, was the horror of Sir Munn Morrison-Munn and Mr. Leveson, to say nothing of that of the injured Lord Woolford, at hypocrisy that had cloaked the man's positive rascality in the guise of an excessive religiosity, and blasphemy that had exulted over successful crime as answered prayer. They felt it a sacred duty to society to bring crime so hateful to just punishment and public execration, especially Lord Woolford. It was because he was so very large a marquis that he was commonly called Carabas; but that is by the way. The

marquis felt that for this pernicious curate to steal the very money intended to procure his dismissal, was a fiendish refinement of iniquity, it was like seething a kid in its mother's milk, he observed to an intimate friend. The Marquis of Carabas was not a justice of the peace, it is true, but his influence over those functionaries was great.

Then poor Honeybun had to be considered. He was but just returned from a period of unwilling sojourn at his country's expense, and had to make an honest name for himself in the teeth of public prejudice. If he was to have been prosecuted, how unjust to suffer the greater sinner to go free!

The case was therefore proceeded with, George Burroughes deriving a gloomy consolation from the reflection that the scandal of the suspicion and the traced notes, alone had brought the poor curate to ruin so complete, that even a committal for trial at the assizes could not increase it.

CHAPTER X.

It was the day of the magisterial inquiry, a bleak and bitter March afternoon, with a cloudless sky of a certain hard metallic lustre and that steady breadth of bright sunlight, which, in conjunction with the pitiless searching east wind, has the effect of a cruelly sarcastic smile.

Though it was Saturday, Mrs. Ray was unoccupied. She sat alone in the parlour by the frugal, ineffectual fire, with some pretence of plain sewing in her hand, and gazed blankly out of window at the clouds of dust rolling by on wind-gusts, and watched the budding trees across the road bend and shudder to their onset, with hopeless eyes. She shivered by the pinched fire, cowering over it in a way foreign to her Spartan habits, as if the chill of the savage wind had cut into her heart.

The familiar room had a desolate air. Walter's couch, vacated only that morning, already had the forlorn aspect of long disuse; the house was very still, empty of all but herself, even Bella being absent on an errand. Walter was gone to Bournemouth in charge of a sweet-faced nurse for a month; his mother scarcely knew why or wherefore in the heavy anguish that crushed her; some one, she was aware, had offered to take the boy and amuse and nurse him, some friend of Miss Ascott's, she vaguely understood, and it seemed slightly to lessen the awful burden of life to have the poor lad safe in good hands for a time, away from the crushing sorrows of that desecrated hearth. The fact that she scarcely gave a thought to the benefit this sojourn in the mild, pine-scented sea-air would be to the boy, witnessed to the intensity of her grief.

But even now the binding force of long habit asserted itself, so that she found herself anxious lest her husband should not return in time for the sermon that every Saturday produced as regularly as night brings stars. Sermons would now no more

be required of Mr. Ray; he had no longer any right to exercise the calling she held so holy and to which he had been especially consecrated and set apart, by every thought and word of his daily life, and by every hope and aspiration they had shared together.

William had fallen, who could stand? He had fallen, not as the weak fall daily, rising again and stumbling on as before, with but feeble consciousness of having even tripped, but deeply, irrecoverably, from the topmost height of sanctity into lowest depths of banal criminality, toppled from that airy inapproachable summit by the most obvious and inevitable of temptations: it was as if the sky had fallen.

Yet she felt the piteousness of it; her eyes were scalded by scant salt tears at the thought of Walter's need and his father's helplessness to succour him. She knew his wistful, perpetual solicitude for this one long-desired son. Had he deceived himself in that impious giving of thanks for the fruit of his own iniquity? Had the wearied, worn brain given way under stress of a lot too hard? Too well she remembered his journey

to Wilchester with the fatal bank-note—the existence of which was so carefully concealed from her who shared his inmost thoughts—the vague way in which on his return he accounted for the purchase of unaccustomed luxuries; his emotion on hearing of that shower of anonymous gifts, the arrival of which rendered his crime unnecessary; and particularly she remembered that sudden seizure of faintness to which he had never been subject. She also remembered with humiliation his hypocritical censure of her own worldly anxiety and lack of faith. She had loved him with the love of youth; she had lived with him in her riper years, the years of harvested experience and clear mental vision, for over a quarter of a century; and she had never doubted him, never attributed any fault to the object of her whole-hearted reverence and devotion until the moment which wrecked her world, when she broke unsummoned upon the scene of the arrest, and heard his cry of anguish and bitter remorse.

She knew sorrow well; care had long been her housemate; privation, her bosom friend; joy was a rare and haughty guest, whose

angel-visits left him but half known ; hope, the dearest friend of man, and the last to desert him, had still been hers till her husband's confession struck the hour of his flight. Trouble such as this was hard to conceive ; it had never entered into the most remotely imagined possibilities of life ; yet there it was, grim and ghastly, impossible to ignore, staring her blankly and boldly in the face with its petrifying Gorgon gaze ; all her landmarks were swept away, and her beacons darkness. She had leant so long on the saintly soul which companioned her pilgrimage through life, that she could scarcely so much as lift her eyes to those heavenly hills whence cometh man's help, without him who might not lift hither his sin-darkened gaze, and who, set to guide others, had himself gone so far astray.

William a criminal ! alas ! alas ! the dizzying distance between sanctity and crime ! Her children's father, the husband of whom she had deemed herself so unworthy, a castaway !

Mrs. Burroughes had come an hour before, Mrs. Ray could imagine with what

feelings for her, "the poor wife." She recalled her own half-scornful pity of criminals' families, of that poor Mrs. Honeybun, for instance, whom it was impossible to dissociate from the convicted criminal, her husband, of whose misdeeds she was inferred to have been cognisant. She remembered taking a little good book to "that poor Mrs. Honeybun" and shuddered. She was now "that poor Mrs. Ray." Kind-hearted Mrs. Burroughes had called, and could not be denied, because there was no one but herself to open the door. Nor had Mrs. Burroughes left room for a denial; she had simply walked in, on the door being opened, and burst into tears.

"My dear," she said, "I could not stay away. I could not, my dear, my dear!"

She kissed the grieved face, unresponsive in its pain, and, taking the afflicted woman's hand in her own, sat beside her, gently stroking the listless hand, and crying softly. But she did not say much.

"You are kind," was all Mrs. Ray could say in reply. "Comfort? There is no comfort."

"There is hope, my dear," Mrs. Burroughes said. "Do try to hope—to hope for the best."

"There is no hope," Mrs. Ray replied, with absolute calm, "and there is no best."

Mrs. Burroughes could think of nothing else to say. She knew but little of Mrs. Ray, having only met her during the last few months at various parish meetings and in the formal calls the two ladies exchanged at decent intervals; for Mrs. Ray never dined out, and never entertained for obvious reasons.

All the time of this friendly visit, poor Mrs. Ray was conscious of her husband standing in public before the magistrates, accused of a shameful thing that could not be denied. What hope, what comfort was there in heaven above or earth beneath to medicine shame and anguish such as this? How could this be the will of a Heavenly Father? Repentance? Repentance could not regain his lost eminence, nor give him back his right to exercise his calling. There was nowhere any balm of consolation for this afflicted wife.

As she sat by the small fire, the old-fashioned walnut bureau was aggressively visible to her, a silent witness to an incredible but too real thing. She had seen it and touched it daily, dusting and rubbing its dark polish with dainty care, ignorant of what lay hidden there. And what a feeble, ineffectual hiding! How awful to think of the grey head bent stealthily over the drawer in that pitiful attempt at concealment! In imagination she saw the furtive gaze, the guilty starting at every sound, the trembling hands clumsily covering up the witness to his degradation; and then, the pitiful concealment achieved, she pictured him sitting tranquilly in his accustomed place, reading from the well-worn Bible, to-day unopened on its shelf, praying, chatting in his cheerful, affectionate way at table, uttering gentle jokes and kindly rebukes, bastioned by his theological tomes in a stronghold of enforced silence—all in sight of that fatal drawer in the bureau, which was gleaming now in the sunlight like a cynical smile. Ah! she remembered something more: she remembered their talk on the night before the arrest, when he had

spoken so feelingly of the unknown thief, as of one who had fallen from spotless living under stress of some grievous irresistible temptation, and his own children had unconsciously reproached him as one with guilty knowledge of the crime.

So she sat and suffered by her ruined hearth. She was still comely, but for the habitual over-anxiety that had indelibly marred her face and aged her beyond her years: her features were delicately cut, her dark eyes, the light and colour of which were faded and dimmed, witnessed to former beauty; one saw at first glance that the drawn, downward droop of the mouth was not native to it; but only her husband remembered the dimples which ready laughter had been used to trace about the corners of full crimson lips, and the pink roundness of the now hollow, colourless cheeks.

In the heavy anguish that stunned her and made her indifferent even to the wrecking of her children's future, many past things rose up before her, and long-silent voices spoke. Her father's anger at her favour of the penniless

young curate; his fulmination against the engagement; refusal of consent to a marriage so far beneath her; the luxurious home, happy family life, wide interests, social pleasures, and indulgence of cultured and refined tastes; her rejected suitors; her sisters' marriages; her own youthful romance and life-long loyalty; her long, long waiting, while her flower of youth faded, her heart wasted, her beauty withered and her hair grew grey, all for William's sake — these things rose unbidden in her paralysed thoughts.

Her father, though wealthy, had a large family and lived up to his income, reckoning upon the good marriages his numerous and well-connected daughters were in a position to make, and leaving little for them after his death. Yet that little, which had made the belated marriage possible, was gone, and the pretty, merry, accomplished Edith Sheldon, the star of so much admiration, the object of so much desire, whose chief failing was the pride of birth, who had been so daintily nurtured, so warmly sheltered, was unrecognisable in the grey-faced, careworn woman, with work-roughened hands, whose days wasted slowly

in a household drudgery, to which her ignorance and lack of training added a burden and sting.

Much sorrow had come to her married life; reared as she had been, it was very hard to see her girls grow up one after the other and go out into the cold hard world to work for their own livelihood, having missed all the advantages and pleasures her own girlhood had known; then the poor boy—the one son—what a blight was there! But all the sorrows and privations, losses and denials, of her life, were light as air in comparison with this crushing, incredible grief; love and loyalty, devotion and reverence, had been hers till now; the meanest and dullest household task had been sweetened and glorified by devotion to one so worthy; but, the idol being overthrown and her life-long devotion insulted, there seemed to be no longer any motive for existing.

Cinders tinkled from the grate, and were mechanically replaced; sunbeams slid from bough to bough, shadows lengthened with gentle sweetness, winds howled more viciously, as if conscious that every day blunted

their sting; Mrs. Ray sat on, bowed by bitter grief, and saw no comfort anywhere.

Vainly did the kitten play off her prettiest pranks and put on her sweetest airs: she was not seen. The little dog and his master, her playmates, being away, she was reduced to toying with sunbeams, springing at shadows of passing birds, worrying curtains and fleeing in feigned panic from imaginary terrors. Having snatched the neglected needlework from Mrs. Ray's listless hands, tossed it, rolled in it and left it, she seated herself, demure and thoughtful, on the table by the work-basket, busily hatching wicked schemes in her small brain. Advancing a deliberate marauding paw, she drew out a reel of cotton and rolled it, with dainty pats and agile leaps, over the table's edge, the gravity on her small, brindled face relaxing when it bounded merrily on to the floor, eliciting a crow of delight by the sound of its fall. Packets of needles and pins, papers of buttons, and rolls of tape, were deftly picked out by the grey paw and consigned to the same fate, until the basket and all its contents lay tossed and tangled and tumbled up together,

on the floor in a heap, on which the busy kitten leapt and danced and rolled until, wearied with this unholy mirth, it stretched itself at full length and slept, with little gurgles and sighs of content, all unobserved by the sad human eyes beholding it.

It was only when Bella tumbled into the room with a kettle and an exclamation, that Mrs. Ray roused herself and began absently putting things straight, the unabashed Muffie turning over, chin upwards, with closed eyes and curled-up paws, inviting a caress though too lazy to demand one. The small, soft miscreant seemed an embodiment of the lost happiness and gaiety of home, and its mischief symbolic of the chaos into which all homely duties and interests had fallen. Mrs. Ray's hand, instinctively raised to smite, was arrested in mid air—for who can resist a kitten's graceful wiles?—the culprit was seen through a blur of tears, the avenging hand descended in a caress. Never again would Mrs. Ray smile at a kitten's gambols; never again put any heart into the much serving for which she had so often been rebuked; never again be careful and troubled about many

things. But she could still cry and cry, and the gentle tears, falling softly upon the arid ground of her heart, drew from it, as with April balm showers, a sweet and fertile upspringing of prayer.

It took some minutes' undivided attention to unravel, wind, fold, collect from corners and pick up, the scattered contents of the basket, interrupted by the kitten, busily watching every movement with pricked ears, bristling whiskers, and grave, intelligent, bright eyes. But the effort effected a wholesome mental diversion; the bringing of order into external things in some measure quieted the disorder within; the handling of homely habitual things produced the usual calming effect, and Mrs. Ray resumed her seat by the fire a little later in a gentler and more healthy frame of mind, the bitter resentment rising within her giving way to pity and sorrow.

She wept long—so long and with such heart-break that the keen edge of her pain was blunted by bodily languor, and she grew drowsy, having waked all night and scarcely touched food all day. Perhaps she dozed a little, for she found herself

grieving for long-forgotten sorrows and smiling at long-silent mirth. Faces of old friends, old sayings, old scenes came back to her.

She saw her old home in the sunshine of a sun half a century younger than this; she always thought of it as in sunshine—an antique gabled manor-house, with stone mullioned Tudor windows and jutting porch half buried in myrtle and passion-flower—saw her mother sitting on a rustic bench on the terrace; herself, a little child, playing on the sward at her feet. The peacock came strutting along the terrace, rearing his splendid fan of a tail; she saw all the great eyes in it change in the sunlight, and the flash of his slender blue-green neck; the sun-dial rose behind him clasped by a flowering creeper; she remembered her long-forgotten great terror of the splendid bird. She found herself creeping timorously to her mother's knee, dropping daisy chains and burying a small round face in the sheltering arm, heard her father's genial laugh at little Mimi's fright—Mimi, the pet name unheard for fifty years, sounded through the lonely silence in ghost-like syllables; there was the memory

of a blue sash, a necklace of blue beads—a great yearning devoured her heart:

> "Mother, come back from the echoless shore,
> Take me again to your heart as of yore!"

The mother's long-buried face again, bending anxiously above her when she was returning to consciousness after a nasty fall in the hunting field; she had been dragged, entangled in the long-flowing habit of those days. The habit was dark blue. That fiery chestnut was her brother's; its name was Spider.

A balmy blue midnight rose next, full of dance music and flowers, laughter, and bright eyes; her gown was of pale pink with pearls, faint murmurs of admiration followed "the dark-eyed girl in pink." Gerald had been there, tortured with jealousy. Such a fine soldierly lad, blue-eyed, fair-haired, frank, so desperately in love—too desperately;—she had often thought she might have cared more if he had cared less. He had obtained leave to "speak again" when he came home.

But Gerald never came home. She heard the thunder of cannon, screams of horses, cries of men; saw the smoke clouds roll asunder,

the flash of the lad's drawn sabre and the gleam of his blue eyes as he rode up to the Russian guns and fell, his gay uniform and her last letter beneath it, stained with his warm blood.

> "Long shall the tale be told,
> Yea, when our babes are old."

Then the face of her dying child, the arms outstretched, the glazing eyes, the last faint agonised cry of "Mother."

The manor-house again, the young clergyman whose refined features and gentle manner contrasted with the brown, strong faces and frank hearty ways of her soldier and sailor brothers—the sailor went down in the *Captain.* The peacock strutting in the sun once more, with the great arch full of shining eyes reared stiffly behind him.

A low, soft sound accompanied all these memories; it was the kitten purring with closed eyes on the arm of her chair. Joy and mirth still existed.

Walter did not yet know; he had been bewildered by his sudden journey without his father to set him off and bid him good-

bye; it was the first time she had done anything without the father's advice and consent; even Millie did not know. She was with her father—poor Millie!—before the magistrates. Had there been anything between Millie and Mr. Burroughes? Poor children! Their one inheritance was their father's standing and reputation; poor, innocent children!

People passed and repassed in the road; all turned and looked curiously at the windows; a dogcart flashed by in a whirl of dust, it was Mr. Leveson returning from the town from judging her husband; seagulls sailed slowly seawards, their cream-white bodies and strong sword-like wings showing against the blue sky, into which the pale saffron of evening was stealing—night or noon was all the same now; there could be no comfort—but poor Millie would return with night, and life must somehow be faced. Footsteps on the hard road; two figures in the yellow sunshine walking slowly, casting long shadows before them; one was her husband, walking in the public road in open day.

She had not contemplated his return, nor had an acquittal seemed possible to her. The one blank, black fact of present proven crime and probable future punishment loomed too large in her mind to leave room for details. And now that he was there at liberty, of what avail was it? His ruin was still absolute: nothing could undo his crime or wipe out his disgrace.

He walked with a feeble, trailing gait, supported by Millie, whose hand was on his arm; the yellow sunbeams gilded his grey hair as if in mockery, his head was bowed in misery too deep for shame. An agony of pity came over her when she saw the frail, bowed figure; had she been hard to him, not even desiring his escape from punishment?

She hastened to the door and opened it, trying to frame some sentence of welcome; and Mr. Ray, pausing a moment as if doubtful if he had any right to cross his own threshold, looked up, face to face with an anguish deeper than his own.

The three went silently into the familiar room, absently missing the little dog's bark and the figure on the couch.

Millie drew up an arm-chair for her father and placed him in it; and it came over Mrs. Ray that there was something new in Millie, her eyes were brilliant, lips firm, and cheeks with two bright red spots; she moved in a different way, and began to rouse and build up the dull, dying fire, with a slight frown.

"Father is tired, cold, and hungry," she said gently. "You did not expect him, mother?"

"No, my dear, no; I did not. You bring good news, dear William, I hope," she added, with an effort to resume the old affectionate tone.

"Bad news," replied Millie, dashing away some indignant tears, "disgraceful news. Those miserable little Justice Shallows have committed him for trial, the wretches!"

"Nay, my dear, nay; they could do no other," he corrected gently. "I have indeed been most kindly and considerately dealt with. I had not ventured to hope for bail; and the sums are considerable. For that I am indebted to George Burroughes and our good Mr. Lowell, of Wynn Farm."

"It is a shame," cried Millie, vigorously plying the poker and producing a fitful, reluctant blaze, "but it will all come right at the assizes."

CHAPTER XI.

GEORGE BURROUGHES did all the Sunday duty unaided next day in a ghastly isolation, that pained him by its constant reminder of the gentle presence and familiar grey head of the beloved curate. He was ashamed to stand up before the congregation with the consciousness of the cause of Mr. Ray's absence, and vexed to see that the church was unusually full, probably of those singular beings whose curiosity is stimulated or satisfied by merely visiting the scenes and associations of painful events.

While reading his own carefully written and conscientious discourse, he felt that all the arches and pillars were echoing and vibrating with Mr. Ray's inspired and enthusiastic sermon on prayer. *Could* that have been hypocrisy? If *that* were false, nothing could be true. But how if the old man's brain were warped and he had been the

victim of his own disordered imagination? That was but too probable, and in that case there was no earthly salvation for him, and nothing but utter ruin for his wife and family. And if, as seemed probable, Mr. Ray were but a visionary, the slave of his own wild fancies, how about the seers of old and the supernatural generally? As his cousin had said, George was anything but strong upon the supernatural; he liked to treat miracles in a symbolic light when constrained to preach upon them; the soul of a mystic was to him an unexplored country, wherein was no discoverable pathway, the ministry of angels a subject beyond his mental grasp.

Always averse to personal and passing topics, he had chosen the subject of his morning sermon with care, in view of avoiding anything that could be construed by parishioners as remotely bearing upon the crying scandal of poor Mr. Ray's appearance before magistrates. But, unfortunately, it was an old sermon and quite forgotten, and, while delivering it in a lame and half-hearted way, his attention divided by memories of

another sermon spoken in another and more eloquent voice from that same pulpit, he was suddenly and completely taken aback to find himself struggling through some remarks to the effect that none should be censured for the faults of others, and that, though a hard world branded the criminal's child with inherited disgrace, it was otherwise in the sight of kind Heaven, who judged each soul upon its individual merit, saying that the soul that sinned should surely die, and he who turned from his wickedness should save his soul alive.

Perhaps he might have uttered these sentences without thinking of their frightful applicability to present events, had it not chanced that, in the turmoil of his troubled thoughts, he raised his eyes from the manuscript, gazing straight before him, and saw, sitting alone and isolated in the Rays' accustomed place, Millie, very pale and unlike herself, looking up, as was but right and proper, at the preacher, with what he fancied was pained reproach in her glance. He turned red and stammered badly, then white and came to a dead stop, and then, flutter-

ing the leaves wildly, missed a page without knowing it, and landed himself prematurely at the end of the discourse, inwardly condoling with himself as the most unlucky mortal on the face of the earth.

He had not bargained for Millie's presence at all, much less in conjunction with such ill-timed remarks, nor, indeed, had any one supposed that she would have the courage —some people said brazenness—to appear in public, especially so soon, and after the previous day's experiences, when she had stood by her father before the magistrates. But Millie would have risen from her death-bed to appear at church on that morning, since to stay at home would have meant to accept her father's imputed disgrace. She would not so much as wear a veil, nor would she seek a less conspicuous place in the church than that she was accustomed to occupy, not far from the pulpit, and on a line with the Burroughes household. Nor did she hesitate to exchange small talk with friends on the road to church; and, as her going was timed to coincide with the thickest stream of worshippers, it chanced that her

greetings were manifold, as well as cheerful and urbane. On that day she definitely bid farewell to her girlish shyness, and acquired a distinctive manner of her own.

For her, everything had reached a climax and then begun to fall back into chaos on that Thursday night, when she gave George's letter into her father's hands, by the kitchen fire, with such blissful agitation and rainbow-tinted hope. How happy she had been then, and how long, how very long ago, that hour seemed! As for that girl, that blind, deluded girl, who found George Burroughes waiting beneath the thorn, and walked down into the sunset with him in a fool's paradise, she seemed to have died long ago with those mistaken hopes and fond imaginings. That was Millie Ray, an ignorant and inexperienced child, beguiled by the tender pity in a kind man's voice into romantic dreams it made her hot to think of; though it seemed so long ago, in another world, a beautiful, impossible world, the gates of which were now for ever closed to her. Mr. Burroughes had a warm, kind heart; perhaps his heart was better than his head, else he would have

taken that letter himself to her father; and she had mistaken his friendly concern for her troubles.

But when first she understood it, when, as that black Friday wore away and, hearing nothing of the contents of the letter, she slowly gathered that they did not affect her personally, her pain and humiliation had been great and very bitter. For there is a strange, unwritten code which makes it penal for a girl to cherish false hopes and be deceived. A man keeps his dignity under the cruellest flout, but a woman is humiliated by the smallest misconception. Perhaps this code is as silly as it is unjust: it is certainly artificial. Then, in the unexpected and awful blow levelled at her father, Millie and her girlish grief and romance died, but Millicent was born, Millicent, who had no personal hope or fear and only existed to care for those more deeply-stricken ones who needed her so sorely, to whom George Burroughes was her father's rector and unwilling enemy, nothing more—nothing, in spite of words and tones echoing from the far-off sunshiny afternoon on the downs.

She had now two aims in life: one, not to give in to a broken heart; the other, to champion her father to the utmost and maintain his honour before the world.

Freshford folk were exasperated at what they called the brazen behaviour of Miss Ray, and it must be confessed that she showed small consideration for the innocent pleasures of the congregation by thus appearing in their midst just as the first irrecoverable bloom of the scandal was being enjoyed. For what else could people be discussing, as they mingled together and loitered through the churchyard after morning service? And who would not be annoyed and disconcerted at being interrupted in well-prepared conversational climaxes, such as the description of the arrest, or in such comments as "Those poor Rays," "So sad for the family," "Not a shadow of doubt—instantly committed for trial," "Terrible hypocrisy," "No one knows how long it may have been going on," "And people do say," &c., by the close proximity of "that poor Miss Ray's" pale, determined young face.

Poor Lady Morrison-Munn was amongst

the chief sufferers by Millie's brazen defiance of public opinions and convenience.

This ill-starred lady, who had finally declined Miss Ray as governess to her children, on the day before the arrest, in consequence of "distressing circumstances," was lamenting with profound self-pity to Mr. Leveson, the magistrate on whose warrant Mr. Ray had been arrested, on the way to her carriage, the inconvenience of having to hunt up another governess and the advantages afforded by Miss Ray's living within walking distance; and, being one of those very great small people who regard the section of mankind not in their own little class as dust of the earth and less than nothing, blocked the churchyard gate in loud discussion of her wrongs, with sublime indifference to the fact that much live human dust and nothingness, desirous of returning to its Sunday dinner, was accumulating behind her, until the sudden perception of Millie's face, quite close to her own, caused her to smother a small shriek.

Millie would have passed on, after a calm "Good morning," but that the miserable Lady Morrison-Munn, inspired by some

demon to patronize "that poor Miss Ray," extended an effusive hand, which was, of course, civilly, though coldly, accepted by the patronized damsel.

"*Dear* Miss Ray," she said sweetly in her clear, high-pitched voice, and still oblivious of listening human dust, and nothingness behind her desirous of Sunday dinners, "we are all *so* sorry. We did so *hope* for an acquittal. Such a sad, *sad* business."

"I don't know about sad," Millie replied. "It seems to me rather mad. But, after all, it's not the first time country justices have made themselves ridiculous, is it?"

She passed out with a small smile, Mr. Leveson, with whom she exchanged a "Good morning," making way for her and grinning to himself at the other lady's look of amazement and at the suppressed rage of her husband, his colleague on the Bench yesterday, who was within earshot.

"She didn't turn a hair," Mr. Leveson afterwards told his wife, "and I could feel Morrison-Munn's swears inside my backbone. I wish we'd let the thing alone. One likes pluck, and she hasn't bad eyes."

"Aunt Carrie, I could have hugged that girl," said Maud Ascott, who had come up behind Millie at the gate, "that woman does so badly want snubbing."

"But, my dear, the poor woman meant to be kind," Mrs. Burroughes urged.

"Meant to be kind? Well, we know what sort of pavement 'meaning' makes," grumbled George. "No doubt she meant to patronize Miss Ray, but, with the delicate tact of a Polar bear and the native refinement of a Digger Indian, she'd best leave her betters alone. You thought I liked her? Of course I like her, but I shudder to think of the jumping upon she needs before she'll be fit for a better world than this."

"Dear George," Maud replied, "how pleasant it is to hear people reckon up the redeeming vices of their dearest friends! I can imagine you speaking of your poor cousin Maud as possessed of the savage courtesy of a Zulu, and the natural charm of a rattlesnake. Well, we may comfort ourselves with thinking that our dear friend will soon work out her own salvation if she steadily patronizes a Millie Ray or so a week.

And I can't help thinking that our poor dear local Shallows made themselves anything but ridiculous yesterday."

"Oh! as for that, once in court of course they were bound to commit for trial on the evidence," George admitted. "That is why," he needlessly explained, "I wanted the thing hushed up. They are mighty zealous in rebuking clerical crime and administering equal justice to grocers and clergymen. They can't see that, while Honeybun steps straight out of prison into his shop, and goes on selling soap and candles as if nothing had happened, poor dear old Ray is irretrievably ruined by the mere suspicion. Yet they must needs go out of their way to stab a dying man."

Miss Ray's class needed no correction that afternoon. Her boys were, like the whole school, petrified to see her in her place as usual, yet not quite as usual: there was something in her face that reduced those volatile youths to absolute good behaviour. They did not exchange so much as a kick the whole afternoon, were models of attention, and even answered when spoken to. But by that happy law of Nature which

preserves the balance of things, the other scholars made up for this excessive virtue by concentrating all their attention upon Miss Ray, and whispering about her, except when they stared at Bella and whispered, not only about, but to, that bewildered damsel.

Millie observed these small attentions with a sardonic smile. Also the curious looks and muttered comments of people she passed when she went abroad; cottagers peering from doors and windows; jesting remarks and coarse chuckles of men standing at corners and outside public-houses; inquisitive looks of the little Lusters; finally, the ordeal of meeting the worthy pair themselves and wincing under their well-meant but scarifying condolences—these things developed her latent acerbity to an extent that amazed her. Her little bitter smiles became so frequent that her blood seemed to have turned to verjuice; such acid observations rose to her lips as not all the honey in all the hives about Freshford could sweeten.

"What a sour old frump I shall be at fifty," she thought, "if I can be so nasty at nineteen. And I used to be such a meek little

prig, made of sugar and spice and all that's nice!"

"When the mind is free the body's delicate;" large griefs swallow small ones; housewives are reckless of smashed china when the house is on fire; and Millie would have felt this ugly notoriety more keenly, had she been less completely overwhelmed by trouble.

But she was careful not to expose her parents to similar annoyance, and acquiesced in her mother's seclusion in the small house. Only after dark she coaxed her father forth, taking him in the clear, pale, spring nights over the breezy downs or down by the sea, where the live salt air and sound of tumbling waves on the glimmering marge of sand and shingle was very sweet and healing.

The household tasks so soon resumed by poor Mrs. Ray were sadly inadequate to fill her weary days of sorrow and double loneliness. She missed, not only her husband's converse, but her son and the incessant care and attendance he needed. She missed the parish affairs; she clung to her mending basket as to an anchor in storm. After-

wards she remembered that her chief solace in those dreary days had been derived from the sudden perception that Millie, delicate and overtasked, needed keeping-up, to which end she constantly devised and prepared soups and cups of strengthening things—dreadful messes at which poor Millie's soul revolted—to surprise and refresh her on her return home.

The poor curate had no such solace; he could neither mend nor cook; his daily duty and all accustomed occupations were prohibited to him. But he still sat in his accustomed position, bastioned in a stronghold of ponderous theology, silent, with his commentated Bible open before him and writing materials to hand, for hours and hours.

Mrs. Ray came and went in the room, chiefly silent, the minute sound of her stitching exaggerated by the stillness which she often longed to break, vainly seeking suitable words in her vexed brain. She dared not look at him; it was part of the unwritten covenant that he should be unobserved in his fortress of silence in happier days; now such observation would be doubly intrusive.

She heard neither the scratch of pen nor rustle of leaves, and feared what his lonely thoughts might be.

They were indeed sad, though quite other than she feared. "He that sitteth in the heavens hath laughed them to scorn; the Most High hath had them in derision," was the bitter burden of them; it came in as the refrain of every stanza in the poem, however various these might be. He had sinned a presumptuous sin in asking a sign and wonder; he had been elated and spiritually uplifted by the signal favour granted to his faithless importunity; therefore he, who had supposed himself honoured in the sight of Heaven, was humbled to the dust and exposed to shame in the sight of man. He had sinned in his idolatrous and partial love for his only son; therefore he was justly chastised.

All this he acknowledged, and yet, deep down in his wounded heart, there was ever a bitter sense of injustice, that sometimes rose and found expression in such remonstrances with, and complaints to, high Heaven, as echo down the dim ages from many a Hebrew Psalm, as from the im-

mortal cry of suffering man, uttered in the Job poem—such reproaches as arise only from the deep heart of reverent faith, and yet which, taken alone, savour of doubt and almost impiety. Like Job, who said, "Thou art become cruel to me," he sometimes complained that his Maker had been unkind to him and had chastised him beyond his strength, unmindful of his frame and forgetting that he was but dust.

The one great rapture and glory of his life—a glory so great and so sacred that he feared to breathe of it in lowest whispers even to his best-beloved — the sign and symbol of his communion with the Unseen; this, even this, had been made the instrument of his suffering and disgrace. He could have borne the bitter humiliation and complete earthly ruin had it come in any other way; but this seemed a sacrilege, it was not credible that this could be the will of the Most Holy. Then darkness fell upon his soul, heavy darkness, full of horror and dread; utter confusion reigned in his thoughts; his faith staggered and shook to its deep foundations; that way, indeed,

madness lay. Had he not prayed humbly, in childlike trust and love; and if wrongly, yet ignorantly and unconsciously? Could a spirit of infinite love be thus extreme to mark what was done amiss, a spirit of infinite strength and mercy thus crush a thing so frail, so small, so helpless in its ignorance and limitations, as the soul of man? Ought not the Infinite, by its own canons, to deal gently with the finite, the creature of its own hand?

Thus he cried in his anguish, as human souls have cried in darkness and desolation since the beginning of time and the first making of man. Thus he walked in darkness awhile and had no light; crept through the valley of the shadow of death and doubt alone. Yet not quite alone; for he wrestled constantly, and the great petition, *Fiat voluntas tuas*, was not long, even in the darkest moments, absent from the lips of his soul.

Sometimes when he sat thus, cabined and confined in his misery, his troubled eyes became aware of the sweetness of advancing spring, of the singular lucidity of the blue sky shadowed by high-sailing clouds, the lovely

unfolding of young leafage with every variety of soft and sunny hue in trees and hedgerows visible from the window, the growing richness of wild birds' song, the flowers Millie gathered in lane and wood for him, and that indescribable sense of movement and life throbbing in everything, which marks the season, and is half a pleasure and half a pain, or wholly either, according to mood and temperament. Then his heart stirred and he was touched by a feeling like home-sickness, remembering better things and almost wondering that sunshine should still be sweet and the earth fair, when all was so dark and desolate within him.

One day he sought to bring order into his thoughts by writing down some of those better feelings and purer hopes that rewarded his inward wrestling from time to time. But his pen had not travelled halfway across a page before it was snatched from his hand and tossed hither and thither by the kitten, who had lain crouched on the table, watching its movement with bright eyes and quivering body for some seconds. Thrice was the pen recovered, Muffie gently

rebuked and deposited on the floor, the chain of thought taken up again and the writing resumed for a longer or shorter space, and thrice did the small spirit of mischief creep stealthily on and snatch the pen from the busy fingers and toss it over the paper with many a blot and blur.

The third time Mr. Ray paused, baffled but still patient, and intent on pursuing the interrupted train of thought; when Muffie, now sadly at a loss for playmates—Walter and Buffie being away, and the others too sad to be amused by her gambols—joyously accepted the resignation of the pen into her paws as a free licence for sport; bit and worried the quill; made hay of the papers; overturned the ink by a sudden deft dab of the paw and careered madly round the table, overleaping the theological rampart and even fluttering the leaves of the Bible. Mr. Ray let the imp gambol on unrestrained; for the desolate thought arose in him that human destinies were ruled by powers as irresponsible, as blind, and as capricious as a kitten's sport. Of what use to supplicate, to reproach, to propitiate *fate?* One thing happened to

the just and the unjust: he had cleansed his heart in vain and washed his hands in innocency.

The kitten frisked on till it was tired, amid blotted and torn papers, fragments of sermons, notes, and prayers, an image of irresponsible freakish fate. And some days later Mr. Ray found the inky print of a small paw on the margin of the Bible, near these words, "Though he slay me yet will I trust in him."

CHAPTER XII.

MR. RAY complained not against the justice of man; he saw too clearly how criminal his conduct must appear to the world; nay, at times he was ready to curse his folly in supposing that things, so obviously the result of complicated human workmanship as bank notes, should have been referred by him to direct supernatural agency. He bitterly owned himself superstitious and gullible, as well as presumptuous, and found himself face to face with the fact that he had been virtually criminal, having appropriated to his own use, like any common thief, that which, had he properly reasoned upon it, he would have seen to be the property of another.

Yet the tribute-money in the fish's mouth was equally the result of human handiwork, visibly stamped with the Cæsar's effigy and inscribed with his titles. He had once been angry with Burroughes for

maintaining from the pulpit that human hands had doubtless dropped or thrown that particular coin into the sea, and that it was quite in the ordinary course of nature for a fish to be beguiled by its glitter and take it in its mouth.

Thus he was restrained, not only by fear of desecrating holy things should his belief in the miraculous origin of this money become common knowledge, but also by the unacknowledged terror of making himself ridiculous, from saying how he became possessed of those miserable notes. His legal advisers could get nothing from him on the subject; his wife and his friends wearied themselves with fruitless conjectures.

His wife one day went so far as to ask him how it was that he had "made the unfortunate mistake" concerning the ownership of those notes, urging that it was his duty to give some explanation, so that he might be cleared of a suspicion deadly for others as well as himself.

"Dear Edith," he replied, after a look of pain and amazement, followed by a long pause, "we have known each other from

early youth; we have lived happily together for twenty-five years of middle life in the closest communion permitted to human beings, and—" his voice failed him, "and," he added faintly, "you—you—believe me——" he could say no more, but the word "guilty" was as clear as if spoken.

"No, no," she murmured, "not that. Tempted—mistaken—but not—not——"

He turned away, with a sad gesture of the hand and sad wonder in his heart. His lovers and friends were put away from him, and his acquaintance stood afar off. He prayed for death.

"But why for death?" Millie asked him one evening, after vainly trying to coax him out into the fresh air, "surely that is very cruel to us."

"Nay, I can be but a burden henceforth. Were I gone, others might take pity on my wife and children."

"Father," she remonstrated, "this is not like yourself. Where is your faith? It is you who must take pity on us, and do your utmost to have your innocence proved. How can you doubt that it will be proved?"

"All is against me, Millie. No one believes in me, not—not even your mother. I can never clear myself in the sight of man, my dear. Only God knows—he knows all—and pities all."

"You must not say that no one believes in you, father; it is not true, for I believe in you. Am I nobody?"

"Nay, you are my very dear child."

"And do you think I shall rest till you are cleared? I daresay you think I can do nothing, being only a girl. But who can tell? Even girls are useful sometimes."

"Oh, my dear, you stab me with those words," he interrupted. "You have been my great comfort and stay, Millie. I have not valued you enough. I have not considered you as I ought, my dear. I was so wrapped up in my poor boy. I let you toil and toil and now——" his voice broke and tears dimmed his eyes.

Millie laid her soft cheek against the worn and furrowed face, and wound her arm round the bowed shoulders. "Father," she said, "don't say that. Why, you *know* that you

spoil me. And we all care most for Wattie —poor Wattie—who has so little."

"And you really believe in me—against your reason?" he asked presently, still with the warm young cheek pressed to his.

"Yes, I believe in you—in spite of appearances," she replied slowly and thoughtfully. "I believe in God," she added, as if that were a necessary sequence.

He clung to her, silently and tremblingly, in an emotion she could not divine. The simple words in the low, sweet young voice were to him as the strong arm of some mighty angel, gathering his soul up and away from the black and bottomless abyss over which it bent shuddering. There may be no heavenly Father, was the ever-present spectre of his mind in the darkness during which that heavenly Father seemed to have withdrawn from him. Yet his child believed in him — in spite of appearances. Should he tell her *all?*

The question of the poor curate's guilt was in those days much debated at the rectory. Of the matter of that guilt, George had, and, as a rational being, could have, no doubt,

but the manner of it greatly exercised him. His cousin still, as she said, flew the curate's colours at her mast-head.

"Heaven bless you for your womanish unreason, my dear," he broke out one day; "though it can do nothing for him. If we could but have a female jury! They'd get him off like a shot."

"The compliment, my good George, is about as dubious as they make them," she returned, with her accustomed tranquillity. "It is a mercy you gave up all idea of the diplomatic service. I admit that appearances are inexplicable with our present possession of facts. But there must be a clue somewhere, if we could only find it."

"*If*," he echoed. "Of course," he added, "I don't credit poor old Ray with actually putting his hands into my pockets, but I can't for the life of me think how that thrice-accursed case got out of them without hands. And even supposing that I had taken it out myself and put it on a table or dropped it, there was not the shadow of a doubt about the ownership: there were my letters, bills, and that blessed half sermon. Fancy

anybody, especially Ray, stealing *my* sermons."

"I can't, George, I really can't. I've a powerful imagination, too."

"I suppose—now I happen to know that he was worried and excited that evening, and also that he was hard up. I suppose that pernicious case must somehow have got out of my possession, and that, in a moment of mental aberration, the poor fellow must have been tempted beyond his strength. He might have meant to return the money later, who knows?"

"I don't agree with you," his cousin returned with emphasis. "If Mr. Ray had lost his wits he would not steal. He would preach, pray, fast, sing hymns in the Queen's highway, think he had committed the unpardonable sin, that he was the Pope, the Sultan, the Queen of Sheba, or his own grandfather—but he would never do wrong."

"Brava, Maud, brava! There are moments when I could worship you, my dear."

"Suppose now that the *thief* gave him the notes for money——"

—"You are a good girl, Maud, but you can't

reason, and you've said that before. Besides, the letter-case hidden in the drawer!"

"The thief might have put it there afterwards."

"Far-fetched, too far-fetched, my dear; but I could grovel at your feet for the thought."

"Then, you see, that would account for the sealing of his lips. It might be a point of honour not to tell. The thief might have been nearly related to him."

"It won't do, Maud; the cap doesn't fit. Besides, who could have taken that money if not Honeybun or—an inmate of Ray's house?"

"You may exhaust yourselves with conjectures, but you will always stumble on that difficulty," Mrs. Burroughes interposed. "It is surely one of those mysteries of human frailty that can never be solved. But what *will* become of those poor Rays? The girls, of course, can never marry now."

"Why not?" came sharply, almost rudely, from George, who, till then lounging in a low seat by the fire, sprang to his feet, looking overpoweringly tall as he stood on

the hearthrug, towering above the two ladies, who were cosily reclining in low seats by the fire. "Why not?" he repeated, giving himself a shake by stretching out his arms, and jerking them farther into his coat-sleeves, as if making ready to do battle *à l'outrance* with whomsoever disputed his opinion. "Show me the hound that would throw a girl over because her father was—in the shade, and, by George! the beggar's bones wouldn't be much good to him any more," he added, with another vigorous Newfoundland-dog shake.

"But is either of the Ray girls *engaged?*" asked Maud, in dulcet tones of purest innocence.

"My dear boy, pray don't eat us up alive," remonstrated his mother, "neither Maud nor I have proposed to the Miss Rays."

"Beg pardon," growled George, scowling darkly at the hearthrug, while his cousin looked at his downcast face with a singular glitter in her half-veiled eyes and sighed an unconscious sigh.

"Rise up, Sir George, champion of distressed damsels," she said softly, and he

lifted his head and looked her straight in the face with a searching, steady, half-defiant look.

"Well?" he said, "well?"

"Well?" she replied, sweetly smiling, "well?"

Mrs. Burroughes also smiled, but to herself, and became absorbed in the charms of the Persian cat, seated in solemn hauteur upon her knee. "Maud is touched at last," she reflected, "and, spite of all her advantages, she might do worse. This is the Nemesis of flirts."

The day was stormy with the same wild north-easter George had rashly invoked, and they were gathered round the fire in a sheltered south-room after luncheon to idle and chat. The room was daintily and cosily arranged in a strictly feminine style. George accused it of being rampantly ladylike and professed to hate it. Needlework was about, novels strewn broadcast; flowers, and what George called chair and table millinery prevailed; he was only there on sufferance and had already upset a worktable composed of two sticks and the

bottom of a basket, and a flower-pot stand made of three bamboo canes and a palmetto leaf.

"The wind's getting round by north to nor-nor-west," he said, going to the window. "There will be a fall of something—probably snow."

"And spirits," Maud added, with a sigh.

"Better from above than from below, Maud."

"If you mean from below stairs, George," Mrs. Burroughes added, "I agree with you, though at funerals, even when not Irish, a little whisky——"

"Mother, mother; this levity at your years! Well, I am off. There's the knell."

It was Thursday afternoon, and that Perkins, whose death on the previous Friday forenoon Mr. Ray had comforted with his ministrations, was to be buried.

George thought of the way in which that death-bed had been attended in a speechless wonder, while standing, bare-headed and shivering in surplice and cassock, at the church-door, awaiting the arrival of the

fortable words at the gate—words literally blown from his lips by the fury of the winds shrieking round the church, when at last he went forth and pronounced them amid flakes of whirling snow.

He reflected with some shame that the idea of sitting up all night unasked with a dying parishioner had never occurred to him; and that, but for poor Mr. Ray, this dear, departed brother might have trodden the dark valley uncomforted by his fellow-man. And this set him thinking afterwards, when the solemn task was done, masons were bricking up the vault and he found himself alone in the vestry with the blue-nosed and shivering sexton, who was not a bell-ringer, with sleet-drops in his hair.

"For pity's sake, be off home before you freeze on to the church floor, Baker," the rector said, "and get your wife to give you a cup of hot tea. I'll lock up."

The sexton went cheerfully, his steps making a quick drum-tap to the slow knell; George remained alone in the vestry, which was cold with the deadly cold of old

chamber as could be imagined. Yet he lingered in it, looking over registers, arranging parish papers, and doing other odds and ends, with purple fingers and visible breath.

And then he stood by the empty fireplace, thinking and thinking, till his breath dimmed the small mirror, in which Mr. Ray usually forgot to look before going into church with disastrous results, the knell sounding through his meditations.

There is no record of George's thoughts on this Lenten afternoon; it is to be hoped that he thought of his sins and considered his latter end, with advantage to his soul; but there is absolutely no reason to doubt that, among and through his reflections, of whatever complexion they might have been, he saw a vision of soft brown eyes, innocent and young, and, the last time his bodily eyes beheld them, very, very sad. Nor is it needful to say what manner of conclusions these soft eyes wrought in his mind; for, when soft eyes pervade the mental atmosphere of male youth, the effects they produce on that atmosphere may easily be conjectured by the least imaginative of mankind.

As he stood there, he could see the weather through the little deep-set, diamond-paned Gothic window, and the weather was wild and fitful, an angry rush of sobbing rain and stinging sleet suddenly ceasing in a bright sun-burst that threw up the soft yet vivid flush of spring leafage on elm-tree boles and hedgerows, and drew millions of quivering jewels from turf-clad graves.

Taking advantage of one of these sun-bursts, just as the knell stopped, he went out and locked the door with due care and then stepped briskly along the narrow path between the green grave mounds, holding his felt hat on in the teeth of the gusty wind, so that his vision being to a certain extent obscured, he was startled, on passing the great century-old yew to see a figure flit from its leeward side, and to encounter the actual gaze of the brown eyes, now filling his mental vision.

"How do you do, Mr. Burroughes?" Millie said. "I was beginning to fear that I had missed you. I came round this way on purpose to see you."

"O Miss Ray! you surely have not been waiting, and in this storm?" he exclaimed,

looking at the wet umbrella in her hand and then at her face, that was marbled with pink and stung with rain and sleet, and at the melting sleet-flakes caught in her hair. "If I had had the faintest suspicion——"

"I was fairly sheltered beneath the yew," she replied, glancing up at the thick roof of black-green gloom, which had arched over some ten generations, now sleeping beneath its shade. "I particularly wished to see you. I have no time to go to your house and you cannot come to ours at present, so the only thing was to intercept you here after the funeral," she added, turning a little to meet at a more convenient angle the wind that tossed her draperies, ruffled her hair, and stung her cheeks.

George, still holding his hat with one hand, took out the vestry key with the other, and hesitated a moment. Then he put the key in his pocket.

"Come round to the south porch," he said, as if by a happy inspiration, "it will be less exposed to the weather than this. One can't discuss things comfortably in a gale." He debated with himself as he spoke upon the

comparative propriety of meeting young ladies alone in vestries with closed doors, and in church porches open to the public eye—should that eye chance to be borne by limbs of any description through or past the churchyard at that particular and tempestuous moment, which was highly improbable.

They therefore made the round of the church, passing beneath the shadow of the tall, grey belfry, and buffeted, as it seemed, in that exposed situation, by all the winds of heaven. The sunshine faded as they went; a great black mass of cloud-wrack swept over the sun's disc and burst in stinging sleet upon them, so that Millie shut her eyes and reached the shelter of the arched stone porch, breathless. But she seemed indifferent to the weather, hardly heeding it, except by putting up her hand to dash the blown hair from her eyes, and shaking the white flakes from her clothing; while George, with a thumping and warmth inside his chest to which he was wholly unaccustomed, took her umbrella, opened and shook it, and asked permission to do the same by the rain-cloak, the hood of which, having been drawn over

her head in the storm, had fallen back, flecked with sleet and in picturesque disorder.

But this service was declined and there was silence in the porch, broken by the rustle of sleet and scream of wind, he having nothing to say, and she waiting to get her breath back.

And during this pause, which to George seemed long and yet very pleasant, it occurred to him that this was not the girl who had walked with him in the sunset a week ago; she looked taller, she seemed older, the childhood had died out of her face, which was turned sideways to him, looking thoughtfully out into the driving sleet, lighted now by a sun-gleam. Even her voice seemed different; it contained more notes, and her manner made him feel smaller than he was. When he had waited under the thorn for her a week ago, she had been to him as a fragile creature, to be taken to his heart and sheltered from all the winds of heaven; but to-day he discerned in her that divinity which hedges about maiden womanhood, and before which noble manhood uncovers the head and bends the knee in silence.

CHAPTER XIII.

GEORGE stayed his stalwart shoulders against the clustered stone columns of the porch, half blocking the arched opening, as if to shut out the storm from Millie and shelter her with his body.

Immediately behind her, reared on end against the stone wall, with its chains dangling, stood the black bier that had but just borne the body of Perkins to his grave, a juxtaposition that gave him a small shudder. Then the remembrance that weddings always entered by the south door, and that the dress of every bride swept that bier, afforded him some comfort. Over the porch was an old-fashioned sundial, its gnomon now whitened by the sleet, its carved motto, *Pereunt et imputantur*, and its shadow, alike effaced by the storm; on the point of the gable was a stone cross.

When the wind lulled, they could hear the

clock ticking slowly in the belfry, the audible pulse of Time; in front of them were the mouldering graves of long-forgotten dead.

These two, in the beginning of their brief moment of time, transient as a flash in face of the dust of those forgotten generations, were fully alive, more fully alive, perhaps, than much of that forgotten dust had ever been, more fully alive, perhaps, than themselves had ever been before or would ever be again; and these young throbbing lives of theirs seemed to them, not as a shadow that hasteth, but as eternity in length and in significance very great.

Centuries and centuries of unbroken silence, darkness, not-being; then a moment of being, a vivid flash on the darkness, and again, closing back like water parted by an oar-stroke, centuries and centuries of silent nothingness. And yet such fever and fret, such hope and fear, as if it were worth while to be at all, much less to be blissfully. And yet such anguish of baulked desire, of baffled passion and crushed hope, such eagerness to fill that fleeting span with heart's desire and fulness of transient joy, such terror of

long blank emptiness in that brief moment, if spent without fruition of youthful hope; while the silence waits quivering, ready to close back upon the tiny cleft of the oar-stroke.

The yew, from its heart of green gloom, had seen it all many a time, and the sundial had looked on the comedy, and the crumbling, illegible gravestones. Lovers, meeting in that porch, had passed beneath it as bride and groom, had carried their babes beneath it to the font, and had been borne silent, with folded hands, beneath it to the earth in the yew's shadow; their children had, in like manner, risen and walked and lain down for ever, and their children after them, in sight of the sundial and the cross, round each of which the shadow crept still, as in the beginning.

The clock had not ticked many seconds out before Millie regained her breath and her voice, and George his self-possession.

"My father must not be found guilty, Mr. Burroughes," she began, without any preamble; for she was never one to beat about the bush, but always went straight at things. "He ought not to be tried."

"Dear Miss Ray," he returned, "was it necessary to wait so long in the storm to tell me that? I did my best to obtain his discharge. Do you think there is anything I would not do to prove his innocence? My brother, who is to defend him, is an able man. He has a growing reputation. The other counsel is, as you know, quite a leading man, and a Q.C. He could scarcely have better counsel with the pick of the whole Bar."

"Oh, *how* can you go into court and give evidence against my father?" continued Millie, with a quivering lip, "I wonder you dare do such a thing."

"I am advised that it is best, I assure you; else I would refuse to obey the subpœna. That would only involve a short imprisonment for contempt of court. I think you know that that would be a small thing for me to risk for your father's sake. But it would not serve him to withhold my evidence now, the lawyers say, and I think perhaps even you will see, if you consider the subject. The sifting of evidence and the bringing everything to light will, if he is innocent——"

"*If!*" she broke in. "Mr. Burroughes, you *know* my father, you have worked with him for months, and you doubt his innocence! Surely, surely you must see the impossibility of the thing imputed to him."

"It is not what I see or do not see, dear Miss Ray," he returned meekly, "it is a question of circumstantial evidence."

"Evidence! What is evidence in the face of character? Mr. Burroughes, you cannot really impute this base and dishonourable conduct to my poor father? Surely you must acknowledge in your heart that such a thing is incredible."

George looked down at the worn flags in the porch, and was silent and conscious of many sins.

"You will talk about the evidence of your senses, no doubt," she continued, "but what is evidence of senses in comparison with evidence of faith, of trust, of honour? Oh! Mr. Burroughes, have you been so much with my dear father and not seen that he has the heart of a child, is one of those little ones of whom it is said that of such is the kingdom of Heaven!"

"I have seen that, I have thought that," replied George humbly, "I may venture to say that facts, or rather appearances—such evidence of the senses as we possess—are to me as incredible as to you."

"Ah! that is right; I like to hear you say that," she replied with a gasp, "for it is cruel to doubt him, cruel. But it is not enough to believe, Mr. Burroughes, we must act, act, act."

"Quite so. We don't believe in faith without works," he assented, smiling a little in a thoughtful pause. "If we could but get him to act, Miss Ray," he added with more energy; "if he *would* but explain how those miserable notes came into his hands."

Millie paused a moment, looking through wet eyes past George at the rushing, sun-lit rain. "You said you would be my friend, whatever happened," she began abruptly, turning a wistful gaze upon him. "Can I trust you? Dare I trust you?"

"Ay, *that* you can, my life upon it," was the fervid reply.

"He thought—" she turned away with a little sob, "poor father!—he thought—but

this is a dead secret, remember, and must not come out in court—he thought them a direct answer to prayer. The pity of it!—he found them in his Bible—only those two! Poor innocent, trustful old man. He was so glad, so thankful. Don't you remember the sermon that very next Sunday?"

George turned his face away, much moved, and Millie's sobs had free vent.

"The question is, dear Miss Ray," he said, after a little, "how those notes got there. Not without hands, but whose? Not mine, not yours, yet the hands of some one in the house. Might he have done it in a dream? Does he ever walk or talk in his sleep? You know I was with him long in private that afternoon. He was troubled and excited—probably under the influence of one dominant and fixed idea—need of money for Walter's sake."

"In his sleep? The idea is new. O Mr. Burroughes!" she cried, "if he did that he is lost."

"I wish to heaven I hadn't suggested it! You'd better sit on this," cried George, seeing her sway, and taking the bier down

to its natural position and placing it across the church door. "You've been walking and standing and battling with the storm all this while and—I'll get you some wine from the vestry, shall I?"

"No—oh no! I'm not such a poor creature as that," she replied, taking the singular seat offered her. "That sleep-walking idea is deadly. You see, there could be no proof, no evidence. It would amount to the fact that *he* took the notes, and nothing more. But, even in that case, the notes must have been in the house, virtually in his possession first."

"Quite so," George agreed. He had taken a seat on the bier beside her, sitting sideways, that he might face her, and stayed himself in that position by an arm outstretched against the chamfered stone lintel, a little behind and above her. The sleet and rain were over and the sun was shining brightly now; but they had not observed it, nor did they observe a light-footed figure passing in front of their porch; for Millie was looking down on the foot-worn flags, and George was looking upon her face, and the sun, though some points south of west

cast the passer's shadow at this hour quite clear of the porch, only grazing the steps and east lintel.

"Quite so," he assented, "we have still to account for the spiriting of those thrice-accursed things from my pockets. To that end I rack my brains night and day—I even dream about it."

"When you were alone with him in the other room, did you take anything from that pocket? Did you sit in such a way that it might have fallen from the pocket? You brought Walter the Tennyson that afternoon."

"I carried that in my hand. I've gone over it all so often in memory. But I cannot remember putting my hand to my pocket once. It was dark before I left and the lights were insufficient."

"Do you remember the handkerchief I brought you the next day? No? I gave it into your own hands in the presence of your mother and Miss Ascott. I went to the Rectory ostensibly on purpose. My mother picked it up on the Saturday forenoon in the sitting-room, in a dark corner

under the table—not near the bureau. No one would pick a pocket and let a handkerchief, certain to be marked, lie about the room to tell tales."

"By George, this is a point!" he cried, springing to his feet and making a few paces in the porch. "You can swear to the handkerchief, so can your mother. I have a sort of vague memory of something you put into my hand that afternoon. It seemed to be a letter. I must have taken out the handkerchief and dragged the case out with it. The case would have fallen open, of course, but the notes couldn't have flown between the leaves of that Bible, even if it had been lying open."

"It is never left open. It is only used at family prayer. I put it ready to be used myself that morning. I dusted it myself before breakfast. We all stand with our faces to the wall at prayers, so that none of us saw the finding of the notes. But I remember a long pause after the Bible was opened, and my poor father, in a moved voice, instead of reading a chapter, calling upon us to kneel down and give thanks for

signal mercies received. Poor father, poor guileless heart!"

"Did Bella put the notes in the Bible? Ask her."

"No, she did not. She has never so much as seen bank-notes. We, of course, asked her. Nor had she touched or seen the letter-case."

"Counsel ought to be instructed of this finding, Miss Ray."

"Never without my father's permission. It is his secret. I thought I might tell you, under the seal of strictest secrecy, remember, because it might help you to throw light upon the loss of these notes. But you must never, never betray me; it would be sacrilege in his eyes to publish it. And I should not have told you, perhaps, but — but" — her face flushed, and she looked straight away into the budded elm-boughs and greening hedges, vivid now in the long, level rays of the sinking sun.

"But you *know* that you may trust me," he added, resuming his place on the bier and again staying himself by a hand on the lintel behind her; "dear, dearest, when

you know that I love you with all my heart."

"Hush!" she said, starting away from him and rising, "You must not speak in that way. How can I think of my own happiness—of anything, but my father's misery and dishonour?"

"Dear, it is in misery and trouble that people need each other and find each other."

"Not in misery like this. This sets one apart. Disgrace—dishonour——"

"No, no—not for you!"

"Yes; for me. If for him—for me. Till he is cleared—for me."

"O Millie, Millie!"

"Hush! hush! Not that tone, Mr. Burroughes. Never again. For one in my position there can be no ties but such as date from birth. Pray remember that. Perhaps I had better not have told you this thing. But, if you think on it, other things may come to your memory. The handkerchief may help. The lawyers must, of course, hear of that. I cannot say what hopes I have in that handkerchief—unreasonable hopes, perhaps."

"Millie, I will move heaven and earth to clear him," said George, who had risen when she did, and was standing face to face with her, his eyes bright and dark with deep feeling. "But, cleared or not, you are mine, remember, as I shall always be yours. You must not be morbid, whatever happens. And what have I done that *my* life should be spoilt?"

"This is no time for such talk," she replied, with quivering lips, paling face and wet eyes. "Please do not make me regret this confidence. Consider our position, and you will see that it is unbecoming for me even to be seen with you at present; so much so that I was going to ask you to leave the churchyard by another gate from that I take."

"I don't see it," he returned sturdily, "I can't see it, and I won't see it. But your wish must be law—only, O Millie, those wretched bits of paper. If I'd only put them in the proper place, in my pocket-book—by the way, counsel ought to make a point of that. Nobody would dream of taking a letter-case for money—a thief would

take a pocket-book or purse. Oh, there is no doubt but I must have dropped the thing in taking out my handkerchief; but why in the name of all that's bothersome did I drop that disastrous handkerchief?"

"At all events," she rejoined, "the finding of the handkerchief proves that you took it out and points to the letter-case falling with it. The rest is still dark," she sighed, "still dark."

In the meantime the passer-by, whose shadow had not been perceived by the two in the porch, had sped quickly beneath the yew and round to a little low door opening into the chancel, of which she had the key.

Entering by this, she shut it, turned the key on the inside, and sat down in one of the choir stalls. Her heart was aching with sharp pain; her dark heart's-ease eyes were clouded and downcast; on her mental vision was indelibly engraved a picture of the two in the porch sitting on the bier, their figures outlined clearly against the massive oaken door in the Gothic stone archway. Millie, delicately flushed and ani-

mated, storm-blown and picturesque, with the white flakes melting in her ruffled hair and falling hood. George, absorbed in her, earnest feeling expressed in every line of his strong frame, almost sheltering her with the arm stayed against the door-jamb, his face, unseen, yet all the more eloquent to her imagination, stimulated as Maud's was.

She could see the inside of the south door and feel the two sitting on the outside, their voices, the sound of which she had caught in passing, inaudible through the massive oak door and solid stone walls. She, too, heard the slow, loud ticking of the clock in the belfry tower, and nothing else but the quick, fierce beats of her own heart.

She bowed her head over the book-ledge in front of the stall and covered her face; hot, scalding drops fell from the dark eyes on to the psalter lying there; the world had turned grey and strange, without light; she did not know herself; she was like a little lost child in a wood at nightfall. Why this piercing pain, this homeless, homesick anguish? the poor beauty wondered.

She had never known pain, and was unacquainted with sorrow. Lightly and unconsciously she had broken many hearts, amused at the havoc made by her beauty and charm, pleased with the incense of adoration and ignorant of the pain it caused. Lightly and gaily she had fluttered through her youth, taking pleasure and amusement as her daily bread, with no aim except to enjoy with the fulness of perfect health and perfect youth.

It had never seemed strange to her that the most plastic and precious years of life, years passed even by the most richly gilded male youth in study and discipline, should be entirely devoted to the pursuit of frivolous and empty pleasures; like other girls, she was quite ready to accept what should be relaxation from effort as the object of existence, and, like others, in this unnatural way of living, she had suffered in mind, soul, and heart. But, unlike others, she had been scathed and scarred less than might have been expected by those Moloch fires, through which the wealthy classes pass their girl children, after making them spend childhood in learning to

ignore the realities of life, and in diligent study of a distorted, maimed, and false picture of the world. No great demand had ever been made on her emotions, no claim on her unselfishness, and no sorrow had corrected the enervating tendency of incessant enjoyment.

But to-day the poor butterfly beauty had her dark hour at last—such an hour as she had often caused in pure lightness of heart—and drank deeply from the cup of bitterness she had so often given to others, alone in the cold, empty church, bowed down in the choir-stall, as if praying—as she may have been.

The clock ticked on, aureoled saints looked serenely down from jewel-coloured windows upon the still figure alone in the dim church, the shadows of the cross and the sun-dial marked the passing minutes; the sun sank, the shadow was lost; a brown gloom gathered about the arches. The still figure moved with a heavy sigh and looked up, with helpless trouble in the dazed eyes and dark crescents beneath them.

Taking the basket she had brought with

her, she went to the altar, where the dusk was already deep, and removed the flower-vases to the vestry, where she re-arranged and renewed them from the basket. But she paused over one rose, holding it thoughtfully in her hand for a minute, and replacing it in the basket. Having replaced the vases on the dim altar, she turned outside the rails as if to judge of their effect, and suddenly fell on her knees and covered her face.

She left the church by the north side, thus avoiding the porch under the sun-dial; and set off home at a brisk pace, much buffeted by the wind.

She had not gone far before she overtook another female figure, buffeted in like manner by the wind, and in as great a hurry as she. It was that of Millie, who turned at the sound of the quick footsteps behind, and looked into a laughing face, richly crimsoned by the wind, and soft pansy eyes full of light, and slackened her pace with a bow of recognition. But a warm hand-clasp and winning smile brought her to a momentary stand-still.

"We are going the same way, Miss Ray. What a wind! Tiring, isn't it? I've been wanting so much to call, but couldn't summon up courage. I daresay your father and mother would not see me if I did. How are they? And have you heard from Walter? So glad he likes Bournemouth. The pines will do him good. So good for lungs."

"He says that your friends are very kind to him, Miss Ascott."

"Oh! the Hope-Ascotts; they delight in Walter. Everybody likes Walter. I quite miss him. I've some idea of sending him a love-letter."

"Walter would be delighted. He likes you so much. I am afraid I must go in; I am late. My mother sees no one at present," Millie said, pausing at her own door, her heart warming to this bright, pretty, happy Maud, who evidently meant so kindly towards her and hers.

"Good night, then, dear Miss Ray," the latter replied, drawing the beautiful white rose from her basket. "Will you give this to your father, with my kindest regards, and

tell him that I am *quite sure* things will come right."

"Thank you," was Millie's reply in a faint, uncertain voice.

"Miss Ascott is a sweet young woman," was Mr. Ray's comment on the message—"a very sweet young woman." And Millie observed that the rose was placed within his sight, and that he sat looking at it all the evening long.

The night was so windy and cold, there was no question of persuading Mr. Ray to go out. Millie tried to cheer her father and mother by talking, but her topics were few and well-worn, the hours dragged very slowly by, and she was very tired and so white and worn that she was condemned to take a cup of something warm and nourishing—her life at this time seemed to bristle with dreadful cups of something warm and nourishing—but all the time she was thinking of the south porch.

The porch was empty now, and the black bier swallowed in black shadow; no living thing stirred there—not so much as an owl. But though the dark night hid

the dark yew and the crumbling graves and obscured one dim little planet, it revealed an immeasurable universe, teeming with suns, and powdered with innumerable shining stars.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE morning was mild and sunny, the air sweet and caressing, alive with stimulating scents of young leafage and opening blossom. That freakish creature, Spring, was in one of those rare moods of soft penitence and genial relenting that enslave the hearts of mankind, making them forget all her mad devilries and compose verses to her countless charms.

The day of Mr. Ray's trial was at hand; the dropped handkerchief and the bits of bank-note therein had done little to enlighten his legal advisers as to the manner in which he had become possessed of the missing notes, the discovery of which in the Bible had been jealously guarded from them. George was in despair.

He was wont to seek, and also to find, consolation during affliction, of whatsoever nature, in a short, black, and to the female

eye, extremely dirty, pipe of dubious age and uncertain origin.

This pipe was not lightly resorted to, but carefully reserved for time of need, though there is reason to suppose that it was occasionally smoked in happier moments, to keep it in proper order. This, however, is matter of conjecture merely, and not to be regarded as historic truth. It, or rather she (since all things that minister to male comfort and joy are necessarily feminine, from a ship downwards), usually occupied a place of honoured repose on her master's study mantelpiece, whence he was wont, from time to time, after fondly regarding her, to take and tenderly polish her with the palm of his hand. Many were the secrets confided to this illustrious pipe, who was known in the family variously as Jemima and Mrs. George; many a difficult sermon had she helped to compose; many a problem, social, theological, parochial, or purely abstract, had she contributed to solve. There is no authentic record as to the kind of tobacco smoked in her, but in the household it was commonly reported to be of an

unusually powerful and nauseous description and eminently calculated to drive all feminine humanity from the rectorial presence.

On this sweet spring morning then, Jemima reposed between her master's lips and emitted pungent clouds of smoke upon the balmy sunny air. He was sitting on a rustic bench in a warm corner of the kitchen garden, bending carelessly forward, his eyes closely studying the gravelled path, his feet stretched out before him a little apart, and his hands lightly clasped between his knees, his ears deaf to the fluting of blackbirds and hum of bees in budded fruit-trees.

The gardener, perceiving his master there thus engaged, deemed it a lost opportunity not to profit by so good an example, and knowing that the counsel given by the silent Mrs. George would occupy a good half-hour, had taken up a similar attitude in another warm corner by a greenhouse, on a wheelbarrow, in company with a shorter, blacker, and, if possible, dirtier pipe, filled with even more powerful tobacco, and looked as happy as mortal man can expect to be in a world

containing east winds, frosts, slugs, and blight.

"Pff!" came from a lady's dainty red lips, as a lady's slim shadow fell upon the gardener's sunny Elysium. "Surely, Adams, there will be no slugs or snails this year. That tobacco is strong enough to kill every creeping thing in the garden."

"I reckon it is, Miss," he replied, touching his hat, but not removing his pipe. "What with consideren and consideren about the glass and the seeds and the planten out, and tryen to kill off blight, it do stand me in summat handsome a week for tobacco, to be sure."

The lady's shadow glided slowly on over the old-fashioned rose-bushes and espalier apple-trees, lavender-bushes and pot-herbs, over the pink peach-blossoms on the sunny wall, to George's corner, and over the sacred fumes of Jemima herself. "Pff!" came again from the laughing red lips. "Singular creatures these men—deliberately spoiling the fresh air with horrid smells."

"I was under the impression," sighed George, reluctantly drawing the cherished

Jemima from his lips and tenderly regarding her with a view to her extinction, "that I was alone in a selected corner of my own garden."

"Oh! I didn't come to put your pipe out, my good George; far from it. I wouldn't deprive you of the society of Mrs. George for the world. I will keep well to the windward of her, though. Well! well!" what is it?" she asked, taking the place on the bench by his side.

"What is what?" he growled.

"Perhaps I ought to say, what is her name, George?"

"That's right, libel your own sex, my dear. All the nastiest things said of women have been said by women," replied George, continuing his pipe and his attitude, which betokened extreme misery.

"After that severe snub I can do no less than take myself off, I suppose. But, fortunately, I'm not proud, and my disposition is forgiving, so I shall stay."

"Thank you," resignedly.

"Poor old George! Do you know that you are becoming a horrid bear?"

"A bear with a sore head isn't in it with me, Maud. It's awfully good of you to stop with such a brute."

"Well, then, why not reward me by telling me all about it? Come, now, what is the matter?"

"Well, if you must know, poor old Ray is the matter. It is heartrending," with a deep sigh.

"That is not the whole truth, George," very softly.

"No, it isn't. The whole truth is—his daughter—— There! the murder's out!"

"Well! but she's an extremely nice good girl."

"When ladies can't think of anything spiteful enough to say of a girl, they call her a good girl. I often wonder why you always hated Miss Ray, Maud."

"Now, George, that *was* a nasty one," returned Maud, looking hurt, "and I don't deserve it," she added, "that I don't."

George looked up, and was surprised to see that his cousin's eyes were wet. Jemima was at once put aside and suffered to go

out on the bench, and Maud's gloved hand raised to his lips, with a due apology.

"I do like her," continued Maud, in an aggrieved voice, "and I admire her pluck in this business immensely. She's very young, and she is coming out wonderfully, and has much more in her than any one could have supposed at first sight of her."

"You are a dear girl, Maud, the very dearest of girls. Well! the plain, unvarnished truth is that Millie's all the world to me, and I can't *possibly* live without her."

"But why should you, dear George?" asked a very gentle and sweet voice.

"Because she won't have me—a fairish reason, as reasons run."

"George! You don't mean to say that you actually proposed to Millie Ray, and she *refused* you?" came in more vigorous and emphatic tones from his cousin.

"Well, that's about it. Won't have me at any price," he replied, mournfully contemplating a worm-cast on the gravelled path.

"My good George, you must have grossly mismanaged this business. You always were celebrated for a genius for blundering," she

commented, after some moments' silent contemplation of the rejected swain. "I strongly suspect," she added, "that you chose an unlucky time or an unlucky place. Now, in my own limited experience, I've had declarations and offers at very odd times and in amazingly queer places, but never, in all my life, do I remember having been made serious love to upon a bier."

"Upon a *what?*" cried George, with a flaming face. "Now how, in the name of all that is diabolical, could you know——"

"In such a storm, too! Why, *I* should have been too cross to accept the Marquis of Carabas himself. I shouldn't recommend anybody to propose to *me* upon a bier, in an open porch, and an unbecoming east wind, Geordie."

"You—pernicious young fraud!" cried George, going off into one of his deep chested roars. "Of all the nasty, inhuman actions, this beats the record. Well, I believe you are partly right, after all, though. To tell the solid truth, Maud, *she* said something like it—no time for that kind of thing. Well, you see, it's just this," he added, in

a different tone, "I—I think perhaps she'd have me—though, of course, I don't know—but—you see, she's the very soul of honour, and she'll never marry till her father's cleared, and even if she did—*I*'m out of the running, because it was all my wretched fault."

"Cheer up, George, cheer up! Freshford bells will be set ringing for you yet. I think I see—in my mind's eye, Horatio—the school-children upsetting baskets of flowers, and piping feeble cheers all over the place. It will be quite a smart little wedding. You'll blush madly, and wish you'd never been born. You'll lose the ring. The best man, by main force, will prevent you from marrying a bridesmaid by mistake. Just fancy the *County Express*—'The Hon. Maud Ascott (cousin of the bridegroom) was strikingly and stylishly costumed in a confection of'—oh! something killingly splendacious, you may be sure—'the presents were numerous and costly'—sometimes they are costly and numerous, never anything else.—'The happy pair'—Oh, Geordie, she will be the very pink and pattern of a little parsoness! She cares for

you, I saw it in her eyes." Her own were wet, but George did not observe this.

"Easily said;" he sighed.

"For pity's sake, give notice before you puff like that again, George. A blast-furnace is a fool to it. It's enough to blow away the most solid obstacles to matrimony. I very nearly realised the truth of the fine axiom: '*Dulce est desipere in loco,*' 'It is sweet to disappear in a place.'"

"Don't do that, Maud. Your presence is, next to a quiet pipe, about the most comforting thing going."

"By the way," she said, after a pause, "look at this."

She drew from her pocket and placed in his hands a large envelope addressed to him. "I found this in Aunt Carrie's work-basket this morning."

"From Mrs. Ray. Poor soul! Perhaps at last she'll consent to see me and throw some light on the subject. Why—by all the powers—it's *the* handkerchief! Maud, you are my good angel! Look at the date! Oh, you prince of good fellows! The date!"

He drew it carefully from its cover and carefully examined it, holding it up to the light; a bit of thin paper dropped from a crease to which it had clung. Maud picked it up with an eager exclamation and smoothed its crumples out. It was of irregular shape, and had been torn by small teeth, to judge from its jagged edges; in the middle of it were three small round holes, as if it had been clutched by a paw armed with fine sharp claws; it was the central portion of the missing twenty-pound note. Another much jagged bit of the same paper, less than an inch in size and apparently wrenched from the larger piece of the same, fluttered from another crease in the handkerchief.

"I'll take it to Mason at once," said George, who was pale with excitement. "But I should like Mill—Miss Ray to see it first. She won't meet me at her own house and she won't come here."

"Shall I take it to her? Suppose I go at once."

"Not at home. She doesn't leave Little Buckley till between four and five."

"I'll take it then," said Maud.

Even Mr. Ray had been beguiled out of doors by that sweet spring morning, though no farther than to the small kitchen garden at the back of the house, where he walked in a portion screened by fruit-trees, invisible to neighbours, and wistfully watched a bee intoxicating itself with self-satisfied buzzings in plum-blossoms on the wall, or looked at a row of peas that sadly wanted sticking. But no one had the heart to attend to the garden in these days, and, instead of sticking the peas, he presently turned back to the house, his head more bowed and his face more dejected than before.

Here, before the kitchen door, he caught sight of a hatchet lying by a wooden block, and saw that some one had been trying, and awkwardly trying, to chop firewood—a small function he usually performed, but had neglected in his recent trouble—so, taking off his coat, he took up the hatchet and began splitting the wood lying near.

The kitchen door stood open; a sweet, pungent smell of fresh wood smoke stole

out on the sunny air; he could hear Bella clattering about and upsetting things with her accustomed energy within, and see his wife sitting at the table, peeling and slicing onions with dainty care and precision, and giving directions and gentle rebukes to the impetuous handmaiden at intervals.

When Mrs. Ray heard the familiar chop, chop, upon the wooden block outside, she looked up with a faintly dawning radiance on her sad face, pleased to see her husband in his old place, but she did not say anything as she would have done in happier days; it daily became more difficult for these two to converse in the sad silence the one bitter and never forgotten subject compelled.

The exertion soon told on his unaccustomed muscles, and he was glad to pause and dry his face with his handkerchief; but the effort had done him good morally and physically; the rhythmic strokes of the chopper, mingled with the homely sounds and scents from the open kitchen, summoned up old associations of times, the happiness of which, seen by the light of present things, filled him with heart-sick longing.

This wood-chopping had been a wholesome and, on the whole, pleasant duty, often taken up of a wet day as a relief to study; it had afforded opportunities of tranquil converse between husband and wife and helped to banish many worries and perplexities; it had produced a healthy, physical glow, that rested and soothed the tired brain and brightened the spirits. And yet Mr. Ray had never known the blessedness of it till now.

He had sometimes murmured at a lot which, if lowly and toilsome, had been very sweet and peaceful. Many a time when sitting there at the homely hand work which, after all, is so much more manly and dignified than half the occupations of civilised man, and during which so many useful and felicitous thoughts had come to him, and seeing his wife busied in the much serving he had rebuked as excessive, he had thought it hard that they, and especially that she, his chosen wife, of a station superior to his, should be compelled to perform tasks to which they had been neither born nor bred. But soon even these lowly occupations would fail them; there would be no more onions

to peel, no more wood to chop; the homeliest necessities would be lacking, in the dark future on which he dreaded to look. Now, truly, he felt the sweetness and warmth of those hours of trivial household tasks, pursued side by side in the confidence of warm, long-tried affection. Why had he murmured at days he would now give worlds to recall, days he might nevermore know? He, more than his Martha, had been careful and troubled about many things. Troubled overmuch about the poor boy, whom he could now no longer even shelter, and who had passed, without leave or licence of his, from his care into that of strangers. Would they tell Walter? He must sooner or later know something of the misery.

Yes, the days before that terrible answer to prayer had been sweet—after all so little makes days sweet—and they were taken from him for his sins. Not so would he have scourged his son for any sin. There was then, perhaps, no Heavenly Father, but only a jealous God, extreme to mark what is done amiss—or—nothing—blank, blind infinity of space—an eternal silence and

darkness; a vast loneliness, infinite, pitiless, unending.

He took up the bill-hook and chopped fiercely, to chase away the desolating thought; and Mrs. Ray, incommoded by the pungent odour of the priceless but unhonoured bulb she was gingerly manipulating, was again cheered by the familiar tune on the wood-block.

She too had been contemplating the probability of having no more onions to slice in the immediate future, and blankly wondering how it would be possible to live; for though they had so little to lose, it would be difficult to do with less. To-morrow, oh! to-morrow might find the grey head lying dishonoured in a prison. And yet all was so sweet and sunny, nature so joyous, the spring-touched earth so fair. The kitten, tired of gambolling to an unappreciating audience, was lying languidly stretched in the sunshine, its head on one side, its eyes dreamily closed, sedate, blissful, brooding on the insoluble mysteries of the universe, a picture of inscrutable Fate in repose.

If Fate would but always be still thus and leave mankind their poor little joys in peace,

Mr. Ray thought, as he gathered his pile of chopped wood together in the proper place and prepared to begin upon some more.

The kitten stretched itself with a loving wink and a little happy croon of friendship —the kitchen sounds floated out.

"Nobody ain't a-going to listen to the local demon," Bella said defiantly, as she brought some raw meat and slapped it down upon the table before her mistress, "'taint no good for he to go about the perish."

"What do you mean, Bella?" came in Mrs. Ray's soft, subdued tones.

"Why, this yer local demon Mr. Burroughes and they got down instead of master," Bella explained, "I heared en last Sunday at church. *He* can't preach no sense. Mrs. Bruckles, she don't go to no Cottage Leckshures no more now. 'I ain't a-going to listen to no local demons because they tell lies about master,' she sez. This yer local demon, he's over in the perishing room now. I seen en go in. He won't hev nothen to do with dissenters, he sez 'taint worth while for he to say

nothen to they, 'cause they'm bound to go to hell without."

"Bella, Bella!" censured Mrs. Ray, but vaguely apprehending the handmaiden's chatter with a mind busied in weighing the exactly judicious amount of salt to put in the stewpan.

"His bishopric shall another take," Mr. Ray said to himself. He remembered a certain young clerical stranger, unmistakably bearing the High Church *cachet*, whom he had seen passing the window, and who was, no doubt, the *locum tenens* so strongly contémned by the faithful Bella. Might not Burroughes at least have waited till he was gone before putting another in his place? No more wood was chopped that morning, and all the kitten's lazy attempts to attract caresses were disregarded.

Now just as Bella quoted the weighty utterance of Mrs. Bruckles concerning parish arrangements, Millie, sitting in the Little Buckley schoolroom, ruling slates, startled her pupils by suddenly pronouncing aloud, as though it were a joyous invocation or charm, the name of that worthy matron.

"Who is Mrs. Bruckles?" the little Lusters asked, charmed with an excuse for conversation of a non-scholastic nature.

"Hush! dears; I was thinking aloud," replied Millie, whose eyes were very bright and her cheeks very pink with secret joy. "Mrs. Bruckles is our charwoman, she comes every Saturday morning for an hour."

When she came to think of it all afterwards, she wondered at her stupidity in not seeing the clue to the mystery from the first. But even the thought of Mrs. Bruckles did not unriddle the mystery at once; it was not until she had left her pupils and was hastening home that the full light shone upon her.

She had taken out a letter of Walter's, read hurriedly and with divided attention in the busy morning, to read again at leisure. The delights of sunny Bournemouth, the continued kindness of Maud Ascott's friends —who took him for drives, lent him books, gave him flowers and fruit—his strong suspicion that the friend whose unoccupied apartments he was living in was no other than Miss Ascott herself, from some unguarded words of the nurse—"a stunning girl, who

was trained at Guy's with Ethel and knows her very well"—all this Millie read without excitement until she came to this—"Nurse says I must break Buffie of picking people's pockets, or he'll get into a scrape. We found the doctor's stethoscope twice behind the window curtain, where the little beggar must have put it. Nurse always watches him now, and caught him dragging some chocolates out of Bruce Ascott's greatcoat pocket, and smacked him well—not Ascott —Buffie. Hard lines for poor Buff!"

"O Buffie!" gasped Millie, "the mischief you have done!"

CHAPTER XV.

As the day wore on, deeper anguish settled upon Mr. Ray, and his wife's face grew more and more wistful with vain desire to comfort him. For it was the last day.

Millie, instead of coming home at the end of her labours as usual, sent a message by a young Bruckles to the effect that she might not return for some hours, and the husband and wife took their tea alone together in silence, the aching heart of the woman expressing itself, in default of words, in the homely guise of tea of extra strength and superior quality.

Then Mr. Ray, for the first time since that sad home-coming from the magisterial inquiry, went out alone.

"I may not return till late, dear Edith," he said, "do not sit up for me. Good-night."

"Good-night," she faltered, dreading for the moment lest this might mean Good-bye.

She held the door open and waited a little, watching the tall bent figure pass slowly away in the golden light of the spring evening; but she observed that he took the turning that led to the church, and remembered that he had once passed a whole night there at a time of trouble, when they lost their little daughter, the pretty blue-eyed Edith, who came next to Walter and was buried in Freshford churchyard soon after their arrival. It pleased her that he should go there, whether for penitence or consolation; for trouble such as she supposed to be his sometimes ends in a way that made her tremble to think of.

As Mr. Ray walked along slowly and alone, his trouble grew so heavy he forgot that it was his first appearance since his disgrace in the face of open day, and he scarcely remarked that a labourer, coming home from work, touched his hat to him as usual; yet he had shrunk from going out lest such salutations should be denied him.

Nevertheless his poorer parishioners had

not left him quite alone in his trouble. One had brought a jar of honey from her garden hives; others home-baked cakes, early vegetables, flowers, kind messages; none had been admitted to see him.

It was only when, in passing by the White Hart, and seeing a young labourer, one of his Bible Class, stump heavily out with dulled eyes, stupid face, and an unholy roll in his gait, that he realised his position. At first sight of this wandering sheep, he instinctively paused and was about to address some words of rebuke to him; then he recollected that, in the eyes of his flock, he had gone infinitely further astray himself, and passed on with a drooping head, suddenly aware of curious faces watching him from windows and doors.

Self-respect alone curbed the swift impulse to hasten on and hide himself in the church, and, pacing sedately on, he was glad to disappear at last within the shadow of the churchyard elms.

The church was empty and closed; the dial over the south porch told the last sunshiny hour with a long, sharp-cut, velvety

shadow; the black bier was lost in shade beneath it; and the fretted stone cross rose golden in the sunshine above. They had left him his own key; they did not, he reflected bitterly, at least judge him capable of stealing the church plate or robbing the alms-box.

He opened the vestry door, and, having let himself in, shut and locked it from the inside. How often he had let himself in by that well-known heavy door, made of solid oak planks, embossed with great nail-heads and crossed by long foliated iron hinges, the creaking of which, as they turned, was as the voice of an old familiar friend. And never, his conscience told him, had he entered lightly or without due preparation and earnest purpose.

A few things of his lay about just as he had left them a month back; opening a press, he saw, depending each from its peg, like so many misdemeanant and gibbeted clergymen, his own cassock and surplice, that of the rector, and, on the third peg, an unfamiliar cassock and surplice, both of the newest Anglican cut, doubtless the property of Bella's local demon. The sight of these

vestments touched him keenly, for it is very hard to see another occupying the post from which one is pushed, and his pale eyes clouded. Nevermore could he don those seemly vestments and enter the church meekly in silent prayer to minister, to the best of his power, to the waiting congregation of people he knew and loved and had so long known and loved. Nevermore could he minister to any congregation or in any way exercise the calling for which he had been set apart and to which he had devoted himself; he was cast away, rejected by the great Taskmaster as a broken, worthless tool. That was the keenest sting, that is what we all feel most acutely, to be

"Lost to life and use and name and fame,"

pitying, in pathetically unconscious egoism, the poor world that must stumble blindly on without our mighty aid. Unmerited disgrace, punishment, even the pain of dearest friends' unjust judgment, was nothing to this.

That is to say, as far as he was personally concerned; for he grieved continually over

the wrecked lives for which he was responsible, and most of all over the blighting of Millie's bright young hopes so near their fruition.

He closed the press and went into the church, where the side aisles were dim with shadow, and the nave and chancel filled with a torrent of soft sunshine pouring through the west window and making the brazen crucifix and vases on the altar and the gold embroidery of the frontal burn with live lustre, which grew softer and faded beneath his gaze, leaving the whole church dim and shadowy.

Nevermore might he minister there. He looked at the empty pulpit, remembering the sermon he had preached the day after the finding of those notes, in the great exaltation and fervour of his thankful soul, and a lump rose chokingly in his throat and his eyes were scalded with hot salt tears. Was it just to cast him away for an error of unworldliness, of excess of fervour? Had he then cleansed his heart in vain and washed his hands in innocency? When had he erred. save in weakness and ignorance, through all

those years of faithful service? Yet the slothful, the worldly, and the covetous were left in peace and honour; he alone was stricken and rejected, he and those innocent and beloved ones dependent upon his weak and ageing arm.

He crept into a seat in a corner formed by the junction of four pillars meeting at right angles, bowed his face on his hands and wept, and darkness fell upon him.

Soon after he must have slept for sorrow; for presently the boom of the organ, that seemed to have been sounding for a long time, was interrupted by the ecstatic and piercing musical cry, in a tenor voice, of—

"Lo! I see the heavens opened . . . and the Son of Man . . . "

And, looking up, he saw the chancel filled with light, and the choir in their places.

Then the tenor recitative died away with the divine name on a deep, awe-struck, long-sustained note; and after a brief silence, with the soft flute-stop on the choir-organ arose a sweet and heavenly melody, soon taken up by a clear and rich soprano, singing, as from far celestial heights of sunny purity,

the divine, heart-piercing reproach: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee." Then followed in a melodic phrase of exquisitely tender pathos: "How often would I have gathered thy children unto me . . . and ye would not."

His heart stood still to listen all through the beautiful aria till the last "Jerusalem!" rang purely and sunnily out in the sweet boy treble, and died away in mournful, melodious reproach, the organ echoing the soft pure melody with a dying sweetness that seemed to linger upon the silence its ending created. He had read and quoted and preached on those familiar words all his life long; but he had never fully felt them till now, their inmost meaning revealed by Mendelssohn's music and Willie Frankland's pure child-voice.

There was then another ministry than that to which he was vowed—the ministry of Art.

He had been narrow; he had been vexed with Burroughes' enthusiasm for the beautiful voice of this farmer's son, and angry

at the trouble taken to train and secure it for the church, and especially scandalised at the notion of solo-singing there—puffing the boy up with vanity, turning the church into an opera-house. Yes; he had been narrow and self-opinionated; he had hindered where he should have helped.

After a brief, quivering silence, the great and the pedal organs spoke out boldly and a strong, heart-stirring phrase was sung by trebles, altos, tenors, and basses, one after the other, in melodious succession, "Happy —happy—happy, and blest are they," till the musical chase was done, the phrase completed, and the chorus thundered out, as with the voice of many waters, "and blest are they who have endured."

Then, more slowly, the solemn, soft, and awe-filled phrasing of the chorussed, "For, though the body die, the soul shall live for ever."

It was only Freshford choir rehearsing with errors and imperfections manifold; but they sang Mendelssohn's music to divine thoughts, and that Mr. Ray heard, not the repetitions and amendments of difficult passages, and his soul was filled with a great

calm, and he sat alone in the shadows, scarcely conscious of his existence, till the last note of the organ trembled into silence, the lights went out one by one, choir and organist melted quietly away, and the great, grey, echoing church was empty again.

He might have thought it all a dream or vision sent to comfort him, but for the very real and prosaic sounds of footsteps going away, the rattle of closing and locking the organ, and the well-known clang and creak of the door as it was shut and slowly and safely locked from the outside.

Long bars of moonlight, variously dyed by the bright raiment of apostles and angels, slanted through the east window and shot athwart the chancel arches with a beautiful and mysterious effect; they lessened as they slanted till they became mere splashes on the window-mullions, and so passed, leaving the great silent church full of massed gloom, faintly indicated by the glimmering of starred sky set in tracery of unstained windows.

The clock struck more than once, waking long-lingering echoes among the arches; but

Mr. Ray did not move from the angle of the intersecting pillars, where the shadow was blackest, so thickly black it might almost have been cut with a knife.

But at last he rose and felt his way through the blackness of the shadowed church to the blinder blackness of the vestry, and, after a little fumbling, to the door, thence out among the graves, faintly indicated by the dim glimmer of their headstones. The world was very still, all the lights in the village quenched, the houses lay silent, with never a smoke-curl, beneath the vast blue-black, over-arching dome that was alive and palpitating with stars. He paused at the lych-gate and turned to look at the dim grey mass of the church, faintly seen in the star-light.

It was a fine old church; he loved it and took an honest pride in its beauty. "*Vale!*" he said softly, removing his hat for a moment, and the belfry clock chimed the first quarter past, as if in reply.

Just then a cock crew, and he remembered St. Peter. Perhaps his refusal to speak of the answer to his presumptuous

prayer was a virtual denial. He would tell all.

Leaving the village, he climbed the velvet slope of the down. A soft air was stirring there, though below the night was breathless; dew was falling beneath the clear sky, but it was not really cold, early though the season was. As he slowly mounted the steep slope, with the balmy night air upon his face, he heard nothing but the tinkle of sheep-bells in the distance, till he came where—

> "All wan with traversing the night,
> Upon the desolate verge of light,
> Yearned loud the iron-bosomed sea."

Yet not very loud, but with a deep, soft, musical boom, very restful and bearing calm into the deepest recesses of his heart.

"Here shall thy proud waves be stayed," he mused, looking down on the leaping surf, that gleamed white at the cliff base, and on the pale creaming of gently pulsing waves on dim sands in the bay.

Lifting his eyes, he saw the glorious constellations quivering like fiery pulses above him. "Canst thou bind the sweet influences

of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?" his memory murmured. Then, with a mighty rush, the magnificent music of that ancient and most sublime poem, the Job book, swept through the chambers of his memory, waking immortal echoes from his soul, until, like Job's, in the presence of eloquent, dumb nature, which yet spoke in the immensity of the great, grey, restless sea, and in the vastness of the infinite star-strewn void, his soul bowed down, he abhorred himself, repenting in dust and ashes, and saying, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee."

He stood long tranced in ecstatic thought, until the chill of approaching dawn compelled him to move, and brought him down to the level of his sorrows again.

Shame and total earthly ruin would, without doubt, be his; to-morrow night, instead of that sweet blue arch fretted with innumerable star fires, a prison roof would be above his head; his wife would be worse than widowed, his children worse than orphaned, his poor, helpless boy—but it would be the will of the All-Merciful, the

All-Loving; a better shelter than that of his feeble arm and failing brain would be theirs; while for himself, why shrink from unmerited shame and punishment? The great surge of the chorus, "Happy and blest are they who have endured," rose upon the roar of rollers breaking on the hidden reef; and, with the softer boom of the surf below, mingled the solemn strain: "For though the body die the soul shall live for ever."

He had indeed sinned in his faithless shrinking from pain and shame; he would sin no more. Deeper and deeper grew the calm in his hushed soul, stronger and stronger his trust and immortal hope, as he moved beneath the vast arch of sparkling stars, and heard the echoes of Mendelssohn's music borne upon the surge of the solemn sea below. Was it possible that he had fretted and grieved so deeply over the trouble and misery of this fleeting life; that he had been careful about many things, when but one thing was needful; troubled about the little work he had been permitted to begin in his parish, when that work could

so well, perhaps so much better, be done without him; murmuring over his child's affliction, and not considering the mightier love that judged it fit; repining because of the sorrow and shame the answer to his passionate prayer had brought? What? he could be uplifted over that great sign of heavenly favour and yet murmur that it humbled him in the sight of men? Shame on you, William Ray, shame! Where is your faith? "I believe in you, father, in spite of appearances," his child had said; but he had doubted his Heavenly Father. Yes; the prayer *had* been answered; the boy was daily gaining health, friends were springing up on every hand to help him; was it his to question how?

Thus Mr. Ray abhorred himself, and repented in dust and ashes, while the stars grew faint and few, as the great constellations wheeled past in stately march, the grey pallor in the east broadened, a violet flush mounted to the zenith, disclosing a heart of warmest rose, in the very centre of which was a core of burning gold.

Now the broad bosom of the sea was

trembling in rose and purple, its level rim dark and firm against a salmon-tinted sky. A long, undulating headland, sloping brokenly down with infinite grace till it became a mere line, striking far into the sea, with a furrow of silver surf falling away from it, stretched in dark, velvety gloom between the sea and the eastern sky, which glowed with ever-deepening intensity; until at last the confused blaze behind the headland globed itself in flame; the sea heaved with stronger pulsations, receiving ever-widening breadths of crimson and golden glory; and then, with a visible bound, like some young and joyous living creature, the broad, burning disc leapt above the dark headland and pillowed its chin upon the soft velvet, violet gloom, and all the waves laughed under a little breeze.

Then Mr. Ray turned homewards, leaving the glory behind him, and descended the down, his shadow falling in long-drawn lines before him, tremulous on the dewy turf as he moved. And then he became aware of the song of many birds making sweet concert with the rhythmic boom of the rosy surf, of

blue smoke pillars rising from the wakening village below, and all the fresh beauty, the balm and glory, of the spring morning entered his heart, and the unspeakable charm of sunshine upon grass and young leaf-buds touched him healingly.

His wife, roused from the deep morning sleep that often follows a night of waking, by the sound of his entrance, was almost startled by the radiance on his face when he stood before her, the grey hair touched with golden glory of morning sunlight, the pale blue eyes clear and bright, and no sign of weariness in the thin, tall figure.

"William," she cried, "dear William, has it all been a dream?"

"There have been dreams, dear Edith, bad dreams, and dark shadows," he replied; "but the day breaks, and the shadows flee."

Then he told her all, repenting his withheld confidence as she repented her want of faith, and they were very, very happy.

ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY BRANCH OF THE

CHAPTER XVI.

After all, George Burroughes reflected, the handkerchief with its scraps of the missing bank-note, and its marks of claws and teeth, pointed only to a partial exculpation. He saw it all in his mind's eye, and the thing was very piteous to him.

That thrice-accursed case slipping out of his pocket with his handkerchief, unnoticed in the dimly-lighted room, the fluttering of the flimsy notes, their discovery by the poor troubled man in his hour of need, his tampering with his conscience under stress of necessity. He might at first have accepted their unaccountable appearance as a veritable God-send, as he told his poor child—innocent, loyal-hearted Millie. Then, when the letter-case put their origin and ownership beyond doubt, he might have been too weak to accept the bitter disap-

pointment, reasoning with himself that Burroughes did not need and would scarcely miss them, justifying the means by the end, hushing his conscience to an easy slumber by all sorts of narcotic sophistries and casuistic opiates, till, perhaps, he might have ended by believing in his own self-delusion—poor, poor old man! There was at times, George fancied, a singular brightness in his eye, that glitter of religious mania often seen at revival meetings. *Evans* were much given to that kind of thing; he had little faith either in the mental balance or the ethical stability of a thorough-paced disciple of that school, which, he averred, despised morals, and grounded itself on emotions.

Yes; he thought he saw it all, with sorrow and infinite pity, it is true, but he saw it. Others, notably a jury, would see it in a harsher, cruder light. Millie's father! and Millie would cleave to her father, and stand by him through thick and thin, there was no doubt about that. She would turn a mangle or scrub floors for him, but she would not leave him. Her life was utterly, hopelessly wrecked; his own for ever dark-

ened: they could never come together. And Millie so sweet, so young!

"George," cried a joyous, excited voice, as a hurricane in petticoats burst into the sacred precincts of his hitherto inviolate study, and interrupted these melancholy musings; "O George! Millie has got the clue at last. It's Mrs. Bruckles."

"Mrs. who?" groaned the afflicted rector. "For pity's sake, Maud, preserve me from all the old women of the parish. Don't hit a fellow when he's down. Look here; I've had about as much as I can stand. I wish the whole blessed thing was at an end, and I comfortably tucked up under the daisies."

"Oh, you great coward! Comfortably tucked up, indeed! Now, isn't that just like a man? It's little tucking up you'll get, yet awhile. How you men fight and kick against Fate! No wonder Millie Ray won't have you, she likes pluck," was the acid rejoinder, while George rose and walked to the window, where he drew up a blind very carefully.

"Now you've spit it all out, I hope you

feel better," he observed, with an air of resignation. "It's a pity you couldn't have made up your mind to marry me the last time I asked you, Maud. To hear you scold, people would think me your husband, my dear."

He was too busy arranging his blinds, and picking up a fishing-rod he had upset on his path to the window, to observe the sudden pallor in her face, or the way in which she put her hand to her side with a faint gasp.

"George," she faltered, in a voice that sounded strange to each of them, "you *never* asked me."

"Not in words," he replied, turning sharply and looking straight into the soft heart's-ease eyes, all wide with pain, "you are far and away too clever to let a fellow—— Why, Maud!"

"Oh! do be quiet," she cried, pressing her lips together, "can't you see I've lost my breath? I was in a hurry and ran."

A very queer sensation came over George; his own breath had a catch in it, and the veins in his temples throbbed. He turned

away, leant his arm on the chimney-piece, and looked down into the fire, biting his under-lip savagely. A wild thought leapt, with rapturous promise, through him. He paused, knowing that his fate trembled in the moment's balance. How was Maud looking in that throbbing silence? "You played with me," he was about to reproach, when certain soft and innocent brown eyes came before his fancy. "Cur!" he said to himself. He was roused by his cousin's gay and musical laugh.

"Indigestion at last," she explained, "but I believe it's inherited, not earned, like my uncle's gout. Oh, don't talk to me of stewed kidneys. Though the gods do make whips of our pleasant vices——"

"But *you* mustn't be scourged, Maud. I wish you could have all the—sugar-plums and I—all the—ah! the black draughts!" he burst out, with a small shake in his voice.

"Unjust; besides, you've enough to do to bear your own sins. Now, about Mrs. Bruckles. George, no mortal eye but hers saw that letter-case till the police found it in the drawer."

"Well!" he said, at the end of the story she told him of the fresh evidence brought to light, "so it was just a bit of careless fun, a thoughtless freak."

"A costly freak," she added. "Freaks often are costly. What? is Maud also among the prophets? Not a bit of it. O George! Those wedding-bells will ring."

"Ah! but will the jury see it in a proper light?" he asked.

**

The day on which Mr. Ray saw the sunrise from the down was to solve that question once for all.

Millie wondered at her father's serenity when she wished him good-morning at their early breakfast. She observed that he had dressed with care in his freshest clothes, and ate heartily, pressing her to do the same in view of the journey and tiring day before them. When they were in the train, he talked cheerfully, as he had not done since the night of his arrest, pointing out objects of interest along the road and remarking upon the rare beauty and summer-like warmth of the late March day. As they drew near to

the assize town, he began to speak of his trial and probable sentence, advising her what to do on his conviction, and commending her mother and brother to her care.

A trouble so unusual and so unexpected, he said, had tried him sorely, and severely exercised his faith, so that he had murmured in his heart and sinfully repined. He had not remembered that the ways of the Infinite must of necessity be unsearchable and past understanding to man, the finite. Hard, very hard, it had been to be the means of bringing reproach upon his high calling, hard to have to give up the work of his life, hard and bitter to bring sorrow and shame on those dear to him. But he was a sinful man, and merited chastisement, and, above all, it was the will of God. Millie must remember that they had all been created expressly to do that will, and that, except by such doing, no happiness could come to man. For himself, he esteemed this loving correction a high honour and happiness.

> "Stone walls do not a prison make,
> Nor iron bars a cage."

"But," he said, in conclusion, "you are young, Millie, and — poor Millie; poor child!"

In his simplicity, Mr. Ray pictured himself preaching to his fellow-prisoners, chosen by this misfortune to bear the Gospel to those lost ones; and this hope he confided to his daughter, who did not question it, but looked at him with a silent and tender veneration, herself elated by an earthlier and more solidly founded hope.

He would have them walk from the station, so that they might have a good view of the interesting old town; for Millie might not again have the opportunity of seeing it for some time. So they walked through the close, under the shadow of the grand cathedral, massive and still, in which he had been ordained; under the budded lime trees, whose boughs were warm crimson studded with vividest young sunlit green; past the college; through the narrow, old-fashioned streets, beginning to fill with busy life in the early forenoon, and beneath the beautiful Gothic cross left behind by the dim centuries.

He enjoyed it all with the zest of a child

on a holiday jaunt; but Millie, tired already by the excitement and late hours of the night before, had much difficulty in showing due interest in responding to his eager efforts to amuse her, and became sadly confused in her archæology and dates, as her heart thumped more and more painfully with the vision of her father in the dock. However, Bella, who, to Mr. Ray's great mystification, had appeared radiant and open-mouthed, in company with Mrs. Bruckles, even more radiant and important, at the railway station, amply made up for Millie's divided attention by her whole-souled absorption in everything she saw; and had to be forcibly conveyed past objects of especial fascination, such as china and drapery shops, by the energetic Mrs. Bruckles, whose umbrella, about the size of a young tent, was capable of most persuasive and whole-hearted thumps and digs.

But when they reached the court-house, Millie's courage totally failed her; she could only sit, faint-hearted and silent, holding her father's hand, and trying to control the quivering of her lips, while they waited

during what seemed to her an eternity of miserable anticipation. He had by this time given his solicitor full particulars of the manner in which he had found the missing notes.

Then it was that Mr. Ray opened and read a letter the postman had put into his hands at starting.

"From your cousin, Bertram, in America, my dear," he explained to Millie, "his writing at all is a sign of grace; I earnestly trust that his heart may be softened."

Millie thought it more probable that his brain might be softened, and earnestly trusted that he might not be asking for money. In this she was not disappointed, since the letter, dated from Idaho, was as follows:—

DEAR UNCLE WILLIAM,—I've struck ile at last, you bet. I guess I've played it pretty low down upon you in the past; but bygones are bygones. And I've got sand; I calculate I ain't such an all-fired skunk as all that amounts to. See here, Unky; this is about the size of it. I've made my pile; you've loaned the mater fifty pounds a year for ten years. Cipher that up and it amounts to £500; simple interest sums it up to fifty-five. Check for amount enclosed. Compound interest

in the sweet by-and-by; you may stake your pile on that. Love to aunt and cousins.

Your affectionate nephew,

BERTRAM RAY.

P.S.—Sorry you are still a curate. Say, you ought to boss the whole show by this time.

"Oh! my dear, how faithless and foolish I have been," exclaimed Mr. Ray, with moist eyes. "See, here is sufficient provision for you all during my detention," he added, handing Millie the cheque, which, being written in dollars, gave her an impression of fabulous wealth. "And what is best of all," he said in conclusion, "is the evidence of grace in your cousin's heart."

"Not," he observed subsequently, "that I rightly grasp the meaning of poor Bertram's somewhat confused metaphors. I cannot conceive of any advantage to be derived from striking an island, nor why, even if my principles allowed it, that circumstance should render it desirable for me to bet. Sand is doubtless equivalent to money—muck, as the good old Pilgrim termed it. That Bertram has made his pile is probably the American way of telling us that

he has erected some fine public building; his poor mother denied herself the necessaries of life to place him in an architect's office—in vain, we sadly feared at the time, but now, we perceive, with the best results. But how apply stakes to a pile? Doubtless he means that I may support, as with beams, props, or stakes, my pile or building, that is, my house, upon the assurances of a reward in the hereafter, which he, with the American colloquial familiarity, insidiously creeping into our own tongue—and sadly to be deprecated—terms the sweet by-and-by. Dear Bertram! a fine nature was his, but a sad upbringing. Boss the whole show must be a compliment, empty, but doubtless well-intentioned, in the style of oriental hyperbole—to emboss, probably, that is, adorn, the entire exhibition, namely, all that appeals to the carnal craving for display."

Millie, after her interview with Mrs. Bruckles on the night before the trial, having fitted together, in her imagination, the whole history of the migration of the bank-notes from George's pocket to the Bible, and that

of the letter-case thence to the drawer, and having communicated these facts and their bearing to Mr. Ray's solicitor, together with the necessity for producing Mrs. Bruckles and Bella in the witness-box, was by no means surprised at the line of defence taken up by Horace Burroughes and the eminent Q.C., who were Mr. Ray's counsel. But to Mr. Ray himself it seemed little short of miraculous.

Bella minded the eventful Friday by many tokens. It was the day when she broke the last dish-cover and the new water-jug unexpectedly bounced off its handle as she was bringing it to the table; when she fell downstairs in company with a can of water and set fire to some sheets that she was airing; the day when Mr. Burroughes called and gave her a shilling because she had no relations left to beat her; and finally, it was the day when her master prayed for things to make his son strong. When asked how she knew that, she replied, with incontrovertible logic, that she knew it by results, because next day the things arrived; to wit, pork-wine, colza oil (the application of which, medicinally,

was new to the court), oysters, and an overcoat. On the morning of that Saturday she was engaged, in conjunction with Mrs. Bruckles, in cleaning the sitting-room. She then picked up two pieces of thin white paper with black marks on them; she judged them to be articles of value, probably things that Master Walter did his drawling with; she therefore placed them in the Bible, as the natural receptable for valuables. One had a great white TEN on it, printed in queer letters on a black patch.

She did not then know it was a bank-note. This ignorance led Bella to deny having seen the lost notes until the evening before the trial, when Miss Ascott showed her some bank-notes.

Mrs. Bruckles remembered the fateful Saturday by many tokens; to wit, breaking out of undoubted measles in her thirteenth; a conversation with Mrs. Williams across the way on the subjects of pickled onions and the laying out of the late Mr. Williams; and the crowing of her black hen—a certain presage of calamity.

She saw Bella pick up the notes, and

advised her to put them in the Bible; she was, like Bella, personally unacquainted with bank-notes, and judged these bits of paper to be "patrons" of needlework.

In the course of that Saturday's sweeping, she found the leather case, with papers falling out of it, on the floor near the chest of drawers, the bottom drawer of which was well known as a receptacle for odds and ends; she therefore opened this drawer and "chucked it in, never thinking," &c. She was aware of the little dog's trick of picking handkerchiefs from pockets; she had seen him pick that of the baker's boy and unsuccessfully attempt the postman's. Bella had seen Buffie do it many a time; she saw him tampering with the rector's pocket when she was bringing in the tea on that Friday night.

Millie had seen the dog on that fateful evening disputing the possession of a thin bit of paper with the kitten. George Burroughes remembered feeling the little dog pulling at his coat on that same evening, and observing him at play with the kitten.

But it was all a perplexed confusion of

wordy strife to Mr. Ray, who stood in the dock motionless, slightly bowed in a listening attitude, but really absorbed in silent prayer, the one incurious and uninterested person in the court.

And when, after what seemed a purposeless see-saw of question and answer, some irrelevant observations from counsel and judge and a few sharp passes of conversational fence between them, terminated by a summary of the whole by the bench, the foreman of the jury unhesitatingly replied to the official citation; "We find him Not Guilty," these fateful words fell on his ears like a thunder-clap, and he never knew how it was that he found himself outside in the street, with the phrase "without a stain on your character" echoing through his brain.

The cathedral bells were flinging showers of mellow melody over the grey old city seated at the foot of the downs, when Mr. Ray, amazed at breathing free air, returned through the sunshine to the station, and stepped into his train with Millie by his side. It was like a dream, most like the mental picture he had so often contemplated of St.

Peter, waking from his prison sleep at the angel's touch and passing silently through silently opening gates and breaking bars, along the silent streets hushed by the eastern night, in the solemn companionship of his celestial guide, whose noiseless footfall and glorious presence were to him as a vision. But no winged and shining angel visibly led Mr. Ray through these bustling sunlit streets; his only guide through this western city full of palpitating bell melody, was his young daughter, fragile and very tired.

"But, my dear, why are you crying?" he asked, when George Burroughes, who had looked through the window to shake the curate's hand for the fifth or sixth time, disappeared, and the train started.

"I don't know, Papa," she replied, quietly continuing it, "perhaps because it's so long since I've had time to."

The stopping of the train and clatter of arrival in Freshford station aroused Mr. Ray from a comfortable nap, and, on looking out, he was surprised to see the platform crowded with Freshford people, many being of the working class.

"Dear me, Millie," he said, "what can be the matter? It looks like Bank Holiday. And the church bells ringing, my dear. Have you heard of any wedding at Freshford? Or a royal birthday? Why, the people are all looking at the carriages. Some great personage must be travelling with us. Oh!"

Mr. Ray drew in his head and closed his eyes, startled by the surge-like roar of a hearty cheer from the assembled crowd. Millie began to cry again. The people, with renewed cheering, thickened and pressed up to the carriage door.

"Is anything the matter? Is the Queen coming?" disjointedly inquired Mr. Ray, again looking out and interrogating a lean clergyman, with a pale, haggard, clean-shaven face, who, with an exclamation of "Here he is!—three cheers more for Mr. Ray!" began warmly shaking his hand and congratulating him.

It was the local demon, apparently beside himself with joy, and accompanied by half the parish in a similar condition, to welcome and congratulate Mr. Ray on his acquittal.

Freshford church was very full on the following Sunday, it having been rumoured that Mr. Ray would preach.

For on the previous Sunday the local demon, having dined for six consecutive days on half a potato and a glass of cold water, naturally tumbled out of the pulpit at the beginning of the sermon. George Burroughes sprang to the rescue and, with admirable presence of mind, whipped the prostrate demon's MS. sermon into his own pocket for immediate use, before picking him up and having him conveyed to the vestry; whence the latter, when comforted with smelling salts and stayed with flagons, subsequently heard, with mixed feelings, selected and emendated portions of his own discourse delivered in George's fine chest voice. George afterwards justified this piratical proceeding on the ground that the sermon, due to the congregation, was paid for and was not copyright, but, as the poor demon reproachfully observed, the sting lay not so much in the publication of the sermon as in its editing.

But this is by the way, the relevant fact

being that, Easter Day not coming for a whole fortnight after, it was hopeless to expect any more duty till then from a person of such intemperate appetite for Lenten fare, so that it was incumbent on Mr. Ray to resume his duties, and especially to preach, on that Palm Sunday.

But there was no burst of eloquence such as that which had surprised Freshford on the Sunday after the finding of the notes, nor was there any allusion to recent events. The thin old man, with the grey head and pale blue eyes, so familiar to them, looking a little thinner, older, and greyer, read a written sermon, on a subject suited to the season, in his usual voice, just as if there had been no interval filled with anguish and unmerited disgrace. Nevertheless Lord Woolford, waking from the slumber of the just at the end of that discourse, decided to present Mr. Ray to a rich living in his patronage, which happened to be vacant.

Mr. Ray was enchanted, and walked all the seven miles to Woolsden to thank the great man personally and with tears in his eyes; and, after taking his leave at the

close of an agreeable visit, turned back to mention the insignificant fact that he begged to be excused from accepting the benefice. It was his opinion that it would be better filled by a younger and more active man; moreover he did not feel justified in leaving the work he had begun in Freshford. Besides which, he added, recent events convinced him that he had neither a sufficiently firm grip of reality nor enough knowledge of everyday life to be trusted with the sole management of a large parish.

This visit occurred some weeks after that Palm Sunday, on the afternoon of which Millie returned from the Sunday-school by the field-path and stopped to lean on a gate, beneath a broad oak, on which some of last year's russet leaves rustled lightly in the live spring breeze.

These last few weeks of strenuous life had done the work of months in developing her. Character was stamped clearly on features that had been vague and undecided; angles and immature hollows of face and form had given place to shapely curves and lines of graceful flow; intellect and womanly feeling

lighted the soft brown eyes; a delicate rose-bloom was frequent on the face. All the emotion and active thought crowded into those weeks had awakened the dormant soul, and the soul had moulded its earthly vesture upon its own beautiful lines.

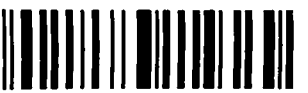
Hope was breathing through every opening leaf-bud, in the far-off whisper of the gentled sea, in the stirring of last year's leaves overhead; and something better than hope was in Millie's heart. What a wonderful world was that spread before her in the soft spring sunshine! How pleasant was the live, stimulating air, the purple bloom on the yet unleaved copses, the brown ridged fields, teeming with the year's unsprung harvest; how lovely was that sky, mysterious with dim promise, vague and poetic, with glamour as of faery in the opal-tinted, cumulus clouds, high-sailing over deep abysses of lavender blue.

From the copses the persistent coo-*coo*-oo, coo-coo of pigeons murmured pleasantly. A little wren, running about the hedgerow, poured out its sweet, keen, treble song, and the vague smell of spring was in the air.

The sound of quick firm footsteps on the field-path deepened the rose-bloom on Millie's face, quickened her pulse and darkened the brown irises of her eyes; and she turned her head a little to see the tall well-set figure, strong frank face, and kind clear eyes of George. Then her pulse made even music, and the double sense of shelter and liberty given by his large wholesome presence and genial voice was blended with the deepest and happiest passion we know.

It was an hour later when George and Millie reached the latter's home and found the family assembled, including Walter, rosy and refreshed by his Bournemouth holiday, and Buffie, grinning with conscious villainy.

The dingy parlour was glorified by floods of golden sunlight pouring through the open window and laden with the pungent scent of a flowering currant, the crimson clusters of which peeped in; a bowl of sweet dark wallflowers and some tall glasses of daffodils on a snowy cloth made the tea-table bright; the Sunday kettle sang cheerily on the fire. Bella only fell down once, and as she upset all the milk, George gave her half-a-crown.



Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 18 July, 2018